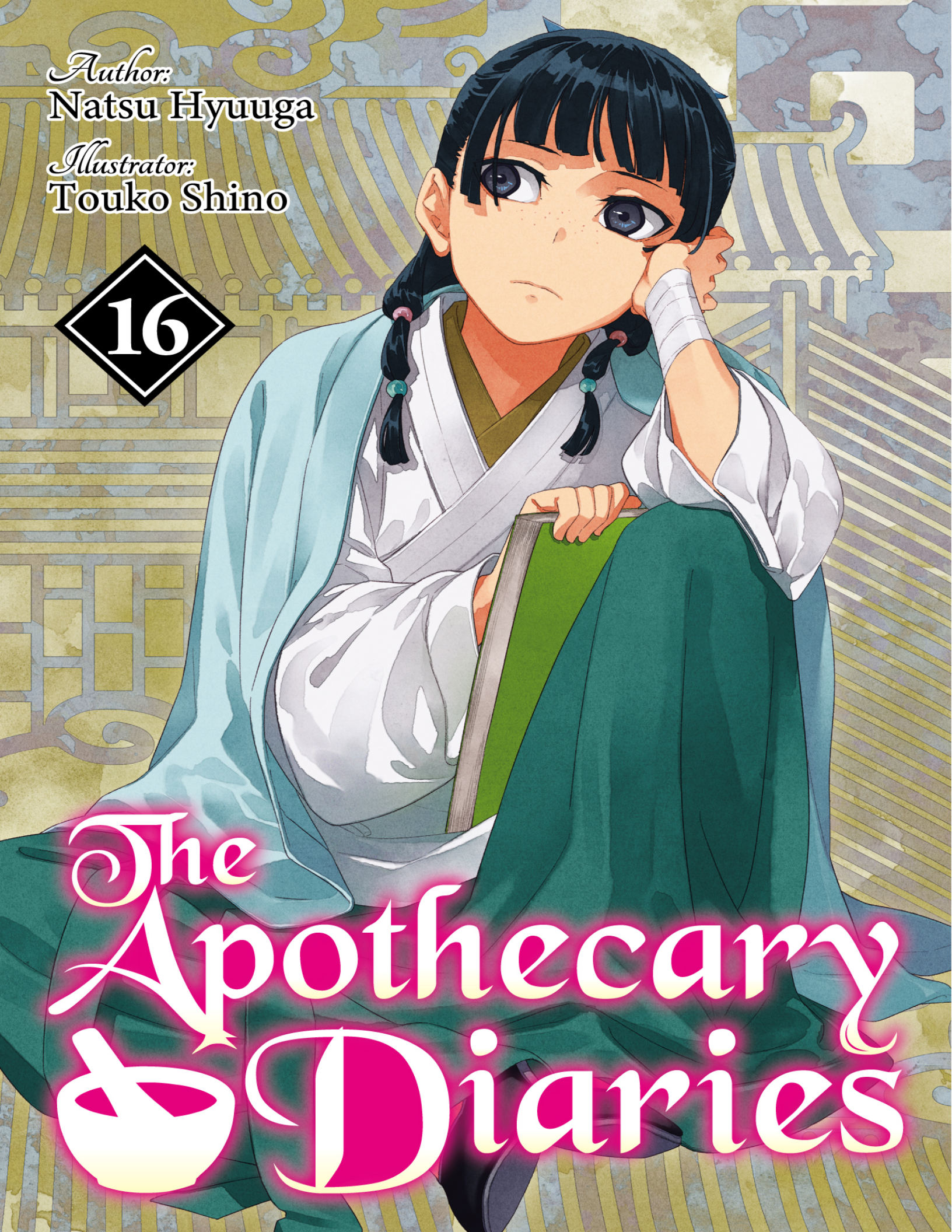
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Natsu Hyuuga
Illustrator:
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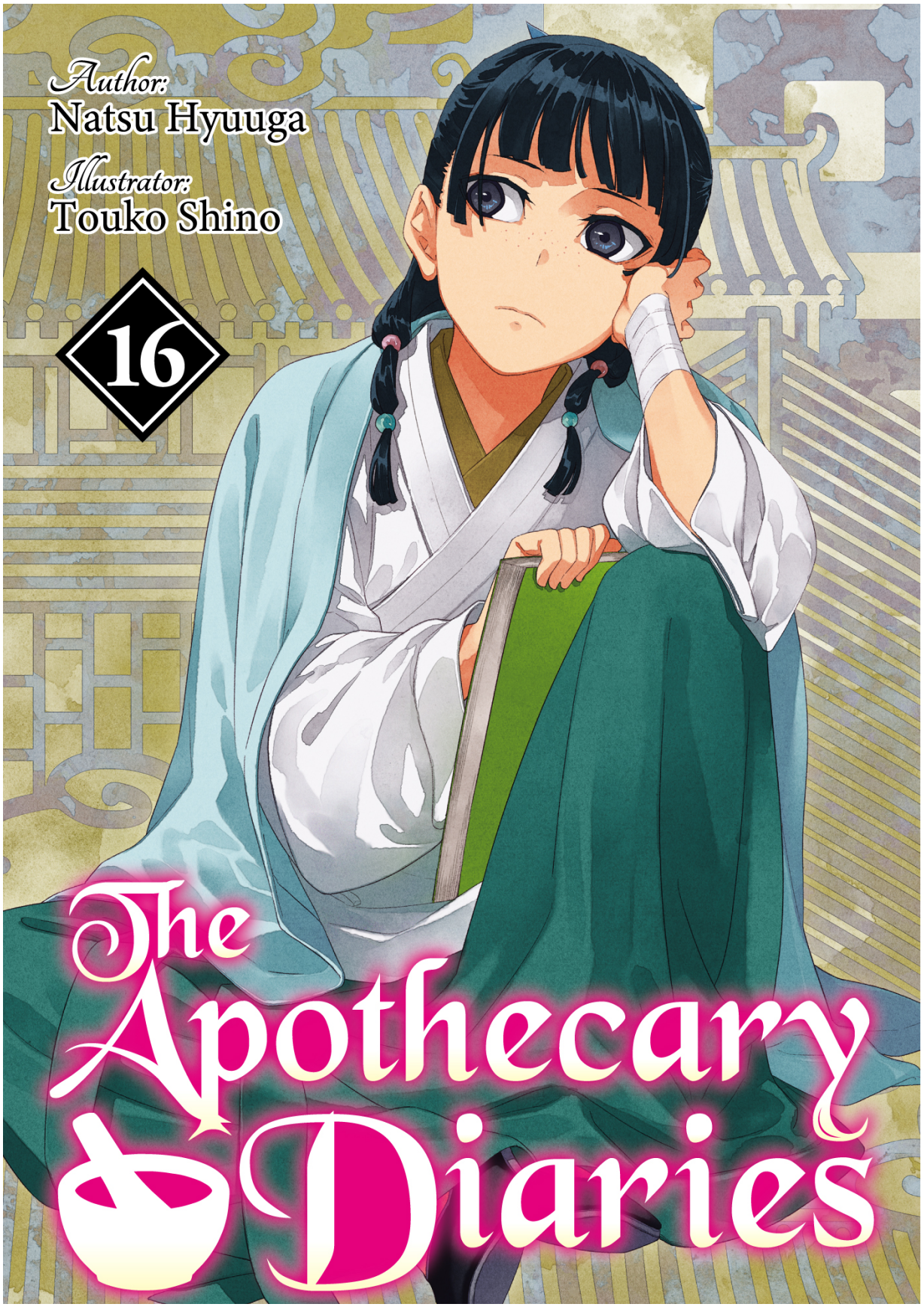
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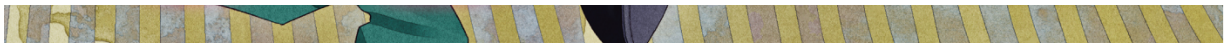

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Character Profiles

Maomao
A former pleasure-district apothecary. Currently an assistant to the medical office. Lakan's daughter. She can't get enough of drugs and poisons. She's trying to get together with Jinshi, partly because it just seems inevitable. Her favorite words to say at the moment are "Senior Wan-wan." Twenty-one years old.

Jinshi
The Emperor's younger brother. A young man as lovely as a celestial nymph, Jinshi is so clever that he inadvertently makes things harder for everybody else. Even as he fulfills his duty as a member of the Imperial family, he's trying to move to secure Maomao's future. Real name: Ka Zuigetsu. Twenty-two years old.

Basen
Gaoshun's son; Jinshi's attendant. Doesn't feel pain as acutely as most people, which gives him far greater physical limits than most. He has feelings for His Majesty's former consort Lishu but doesn't know specifically what to do about them. His brother's wife, Chue, treats him like a toy. Protector of Jofu the duck. Twenty-two years old.

Chue
Wife of Gaoshun's son Baryou; Jinshi's lady-in-waiting. Her right arm was so badly injured that she can barely use it. Nonetheless, she's awfully cheerful and awfully nimble. Self-described lovely (but married) woman. Twenty-three years old.

Lahan's Brother
Lahan's older brother. For Reasons, he is unable to speak his true name. Hearing En'en invoke that name one solitary time caused a great gong to

ring in his heart.

Lakan
Maomao's biological father and Luomen's nephew. A freak with a monocle. He's an excellent judge of character and collects brilliant people wherever he finds them.

Lahan
Lakan's nephew and adopted son. A small man with round glasses, he's a smooth operator who can make just about anything work out in his favor, but adolescent girls appear to be his Achilles' heel.

Yao
Maomao's colleague. She looks older than Maomao on account of being taller and better endowed. She's interested in Lahan, but doesn't know if it's love or just curiosity. Seventeen years old.

En'en
Maomao's colleague; she's also Yao's lady-in-waiting and fellow assistant in the court medical office. She refuses to stop treating Yao like a child. Twenty-one years old.

Sanfan
The third child that Lakan took in (hence her name, which means "number three"). Dresses in men's clothing. In love with Lahan.

Sifan, Wufan, Liufan
Children taken in by Lakan. They do miscellaneous chores around the house.

Junjie
A young man brought to the royal city by mistake from the western capital. He's a good child and eager to please, and has simply stayed on at Lakan's mansion, working.

Suiren

Jinshi’s lady-in-waiting and wet nurse. Even the Emperor is intimidated by her.

Baryou
Gaoshun’s son and Basen’s older brother. Quick to develop a stomach ailment when confronted with another human being. In a strategic marriage with Chue; they also have children.

Maamei
Gaoshun’s daughter; Baryou and Basen’s older sister. A forceful woman not unlike a predator, she has opinions about her younger brothers’ marriages.

Tianyu
A young physician who loves doing dissections. He may look lighthearted and frivolous at first glance, but he’s quite a talented surgeon. His ethics leave something to be desired, however, and after stepping in it during the Emperor’s surgery, he’s had his salary docked.

Dr. Li
A middle physician at the palace. Got swole with milk and soybeans.

Senior Wan-wan
A physician who worked on the drug trials with Maomao. Very good at looking after people. That name, though! You just want to *say* it.

Dr. Lao
Maomao’s current direct superior. A pleasant old man with a knack for medicine. Still bears the signs of having once had smallpox.

Kokuyou
A handsome young man with half his face covered in smallpox scars. He used to be an itinerant doctor, but currently he’s living in a village near the capital.

Yo
Maomao’s junior in the medical office. The village she comes from was

destroyed by smallpox. Tall.

Changsha
Maomao’s junior in the medical office. She learned about medicine from her grandmother, who was a shaman. Small.

Hao
The Empress Dowager’s half-brother. Likes to flaunt his authority as a relation of the Emperor, but he doesn’t actually have the chops to bear it out.

Prologue

Morning started early in the pleasure district. The truth was that it was just an extension of the previous night.

It was still dark out when Sazen opened his eyes. He felt something warm pressed against his cheek—it turned out to be Chou-u's foot; the boy was sleeping nearby. He was some thirteen years old now and growing every day, but who would ever believe Sazen if he told them the kid was from a fancy family?

He never would—never could—talk about what had happened before he became Sazen and Chou-u became Chou-u. He had promised not to as a condition of the two of them being allowed to live in the pleasure district.

Sazen pulled the blanket up over Chou-u so the boy's tummy wouldn't get cold. Then he heaved himself up and set about the day's work. He lit a fire in the stove and began heating the congee that stood already made.

"Wonder if there'll be enough," he mumbled. Chou-u had become quite an eater, and food was never abundant enough for him. The Verdigris House gave the boy food, but he would always snatch some from Sazen too. Sazen knew the old madam was receiving a stipend to cover the expense of keeping Chou-u; he wished she would spend it on finding some better provisions.

Sazen stepped out of their little shack and plucked a daikon from the garden. It was still early for harvest and the thing looked a bit scrawny, but its leaves were a rich green. He brushed the dirt off, then minced it, leaves and root and all, and tossed it into the congee. He also stirred in the barest excuse for some dried meat.

As he waited for the congee to boil, Sazen noted down which herbs the shop was out of and stuck the memo in a basket.

"It's morning, Chou-u," he snapped. "Get up already."

"Urrgh... Just five more minutes..."

"Your congee will get cold. If you don't want it, then fine."

Chou-u flopped up and stirred the pot on the stove. He was of an age

when hunger took precedence over sleepiness. He put some of the congee in a chipped bowl and set at it with his spoon, eating it all in what seemed like a single gulp. Half of his body was still paralyzed, and the way he ate reminded Sazen of how a dog wolfed down its food. With his physical impairment, Chou-u couldn't do heavy labor, but he was clever and had a knack for drawing, so between the two of them they somehow managed to make ends meet.

Maomao, this shack's former resident, sometimes mentioned Chou-u in her letters. Sazen always wrote back that everything was going fine, but maybe those reports were part of the reason Maomao hardly visited the pleasure district. Sazen couldn't blame her; working at court certainly paid better than being an apothecary in a brothel, but at one point she had been away far to the west for an entire year nearly before he realized it.

Maomao hadn't exactly taken Chou-u in out of an excess of affection, and the old madam was handling all the expenses, so Sazen was in no position to demand that Maomao come back and look after the boy. Still, he could understand how Chou-u, as the one who had been dragged into all this, might feel some resentment. He was still too young to grasp all the things adults had to contend with.

Incidentally, he was living in Sazen's shack because, as a man—even a young one—he couldn't be allowed to stay in the Verdigris House itself.

"More!" said Chou-u.

"Slow *down* a little."

"But I'm hungry!"

At this rate, it was only a matter of time until Chou-u got taller than Sazen. He just hoped the boy wouldn't hit his rebellious phase while they were still living under the same roof.

When Sazen finished eating, he went over to the Verdigris House. Languid courtesans exuded an (ahem) indescribable aroma; Sazen made his way awkwardly to the shop.

Sazen was only just over thirty years old—he might not have a wife yet on account of his poor farmer's background, but as a man, he was still in the prime of life. The madam had offered him a courtesan "at a special discount," but if he got too into that sort of thing, the cost of medicine, which he invoiced to the Verdigris House, might as well be paid in scrip.

“Sazen, did you get that kudzu I asked for?” Ukyou called. He was the chief of the Verdigris House’s menservants, and had done Sazen more than a few decent turns.

“Yeah. This enough?” Sazen asked, handing him the powdered kudzu root. Kudzu was simple enough to find just about anywhere—it was processing the stuff that was the real challenge.

“Plenty, thanks.” Ukyou handed him some small change. Sazen might have wished for more, considering the labor involved, but insofar as it would be used at the Verdigris House, he would have had to haggle with the madam for a better rate. Then again, he was on good terms with Ukyou...

“Kudzu, you know, it takes *so* long to work on. This really isn’t quite enough,” Sazen ventured.

“It’s all I can wring out of the old lady. The best I can do is send over a manservant with time to kill.”

“That would be a real help!”

Maomao was a better negotiator for money as such. It was her adoptive father Luomen who was the putative owner of the apothecary shop. Sazen had only met him a handful of times, but had discovered he was an elderly man who looked like he wouldn’t hurt a fly—the polar opposite of Maomao. Maomao had warned Sazen that her father’s one real flaw was that he was too good-hearted, which made him reluctant to charge people; Sazen took solace in the thought that in that regard, at least, he outdid Luomen.

The powdered kudzu root wasn’t actually medicinal; it was for cooking. Customers certainly couldn’t be served cold food as the weather got chillier, and kudzu would make a fine stew that would keep the body warm.

Mornings, Sazen would make up any medicines that were in short supply. Being the worrying type, he always kept the recipes Maomao had given him close at hand—if he just followed them, being careful to use the right quantities of everything, it would all turn out fine.

Come afternoon, customers would start filtering in. That included denizens of other brothels as well as the courtesans’ clients. The courtesans themselves wanted abortifacients, which women in their line of work always needed to have available, while their clients were looking for vitality tonics. Sazen had wondered if it was really safe to sell medicine to people from competing businesses, whereupon he was told he should sell to

such customers at twice the price quoted to patrons of the Verdigris House. He didn't know whether that meant the local folks were getting a good deal or if the strangers were getting ripped off. All he knew was that the buyers kept coming, so they must not have realized the madam was squeezing them dry.

As Sazen worked industriously on bolstering his supply of medicine, a visitor appeared at the shop.

"Hullo there! How's it going?" It was Kokuyou, sounding weirdly cheerful. He was about Sazen's age, but the right half of his face was covered in smallpox scars. He was Maomao's eyes and ears during her long absences from the pleasure district, dropping in to make sure the apothecary was being well-run.

"All right, I guess," Sazen said.

"Ha ha ha! You don't much sound like it!" Kokuyou trundled into the room and set down a rack that could be carried on the back, from which he began unloading medicines one after another. "Right. I powdered the turmeric, just like you asked. This is star anise—I got it on the cheap, otherwise I wouldn't have bothered. Don't mistake it for *anisatum* like last time. I've got licorice and fennel too!"

"That's a big help, thanks."

Kokuyou wasn't just there to spy on Sazen; he also grew herbs and sold them to the shop. If he found anything else Sazen wanted, he brought that too.

"So what do I owe you?" Sazen asked.

"Well, let's see, here..."

When he saw the total, though, Sazen put his head in his hands. "Don't you think that's a bit much?!"

"Hey, whine if you want, but demand for stuff like garden peony and licorice is high these days. Word is the Emperor himself is buying up the supply."

"Excuse me? What, does His Majesty have a tummy ache?" Sazen jeered.

"Look, you want 'em or not?"

"Okay, okay, I get it."

Sazen started calculating: The drugs were almost twice as expensive as they had been the last time he bought them. But then, prices for items and

ingredients all over the city had gone up at least that much. Maybe more. The insect swarm had made everyday necessities more expensive, and now the prices of drugs and herbs were going up because someone was cornering the market.

"I'll take them," Sazen said finally.

"You sure? You never know, you might be able to find a better deal somewhere..."

"And I'll get what I pay for, I'm sure. You're giving me a decent deal considering all the prices are going up, and your herbs are always pretty good... At least, I think so."

Even as he spoke, Sazen was inspecting the supplies Kokuyou had brought him. Sazen wasn't the type to have a lot of confidence in himself—it had been two years since Maomao had browbeaten him into at least pretending he could run the apothecary shop, but he still felt like a total novice.

He went over the herbs, trying to use the methods Maomao had taught him to judge whether they were any good, and decided they probably passed muster.

"Let's see, uh, color's all right, and they smell the way they should. The powder is uniform..."

Seized by anxiety, Sazen checked again. In the city marketplace, drugs sometimes sat out so long that they got baked by the sun, causing their smell to change or their hue to pale. Other times they were just poorly processed.

"Yeah, I think you're probably all right," he finally concluded.

"*Probably*, huh? Yeah, I might be trying to pull a fast one on you!"

"Are you? Are you trying to rip me off?" Sazen looked at Kokuyou, jaw agape. Then, with utmost earnestness, he said, "Please don't do that to me. I'm begging you!"

"Ha ha ha! You're, uh... You're awfully close to me..."

"You're the only person I can count on! Listen, if you try to screw me over, I'll make you write up a contract next time so I can sue you!"

"A contract! Now, there's a great idea."

"It is not great!"

Even as he jabbered with Kokuyou, Sazen kept working. Before they knew it, it was evening. Sazen made up his mind to go back to his shack

before he could get caught up in the tide of customers who appeared as the day darkened.

“Heeey! Chou-u, let’s head back!” he called.

“Yeah, sure,” Chou-u said with studied indifference, but he started cleaning up his painting supplies. His art was getting better and better, but he still hadn’t moved beyond earning a bit of pocket change with it. You needed a proper patron to make a living doing that sort of thing.

The old madam had engaged Chou-u to draw decent portraits of the ladies of the Verdigris House, and they were lined up in order of popularity. Zulin’s older sister, who’d really stepped in it recently, had dropped noticeably down the line.

New customers—those who had arrived via introductions by their connections—would often pick their first partners by studying the pictures as much as by the ladies’ reputations. If any of the clients should happen to take a liking to Chou-u’s artistic style, it could open up the path to his future.

The old madam didn’t exactly pay Chou-u handsomely for his work, but the courtesans would occasionally slip him some cash to make sure their portraits were extra beautiful.

Kokuyou, who had already left once, popped his head back in. “I can’t get home,” he said. “There’s no carriages. Can I stay here?”

Carriages were shared by several riders, which meant they didn’t run all the time. Whenever Kokuyou couldn’t catch one home, he would stay at the shack.

“Feel free, but you won’t find much to eat,” Sazen said.

“Not a problem. I bought some meat skewers on my way over!” Kokuyou produced several skewers wrapped in bamboo skin.

“Meat! Actual meat! This is why I love my big bro Kokuyou!” Chou-u said, pounding their visitor on the back. “I’ll go get another bedroll from Zulin.”

“Just don’t let the madam see you!”

That would mean an extra charge for bedroll rental, they knew well. Anything to squeeze a few more coins out of them.

Sazen found a few unsold herbs that looked like they would make a nice way to fill out some congee, then locked up the shop.

When he’d first fled Shihoku Province, he’d wondered if he had the

right stuff to make it in the capital, but he was doing it, somehow. In fact, he felt pretty lucky.

There was no sign at the moment that Maomao would be coming back anytime soon.

Sazen patted Kokuyou on the shoulder. “Don’t abandon me yet, all right?”

“Ha ha ha! I hope *you* won’t abandon *me*!”

The work could be relentless, it could be anxiety-inducing, but it wasn’t a bad life, Sazen reflected as he headed back to his shack.

Chapter 1: The Calm Before the Storm

In the two weeks since the Emperor's surgery had ended safely, winter had begun to come on in earnest. Maomao was changing the bedrolls at the clinic in town for ones with thicker blankets. Her work had settled down into a nice balance, half ordinary employment, half drug trials. The upper physicians had taken over the Emperor's postsurgical care, so Maomao no longer had to worry about it.

Ah, sweet routine.

Drug experiments continued at the clinic—the size of the trials would be reduced, it appeared, but they were still a useful way of researching medicines. The clinic was now overseen by Short Senior, the same doctor who had worked on the drug trials with Maomao prior to the surgery. He couldn't stand blood, so the clinic was the perfect place for him.

Once all the bedrolls had been safely replaced, Maomao went on to the next task. "Senior Wan-wan, here are the drugs we're planning to requisition. Look all right?" She gave Tall Senior, a.k.a. Senior Wan-wan, a list.

"Looks fine, but, uh, recently I feel like you've been using my name...to excess." Senior Wan-wan looked at her as if to ask why this was.

"Oh," Maomao replied.

"Yes, and you have the unique way of saying it."

"It's your imagination, sir."

Properly, his name was Wang Wang—and Maomao, with her persistent inability to remember people's names and faces, was most grateful for it. If her pronunciation of the name took on a certain affectionate softness, who could blame her?

"All right, order these medicines up for us," Senior Wan-wan said.

"Yes, sir. I'll be going back to court this afternoon. Anything you need?"

"Hmmm. Not at the moment. You'll be doing inventory of the medicine?"

Senior Wan-wan was one of those responsible for the supply of

medicine, just like Maomao, so he knew when she was on duty.

"That's right."

"Okay, well, if Tianyu is around, tweak him for me."

This was a special order just for Maomao.

"With pleasure, sir!" Maomao said, standing ramrod straight.

Why was it so important to needle Tianyu? Well, during the Emperor's surgery, which had been trying enough, it was Tianyu who screwed around the most. If he'd made a critical mistake under the extreme pressure, it still would have been better than what he actually did. The trouble had arisen simply because Tianyu was being who Tianyu was—no extenuating circumstances in sight. It was his own fault, bringing his personal feelings into a job where the Emperor's life hung in the balance. It was practically compassionate of the authorities that they hadn't simply lopped off his head.

Tianyu had found his salary substantially docked, and when one factored in that he had to pay for meals at the place where he was staying, his salary might as well have been nothing. In light of the fact that this would only go on for six months, it was impossible not to feel that he had been let off awfully gently. How could the other physicians fail to be a little frustrated at that?

Hence, every doctor, physician, and medical functionary gave him hell at every opportunity.

Such ridicule had always been water off a duck's back to Tianyu, and figuring out some way to make him actually regret his actions had become something of a fad among the medical staff.

Is it harassment? Good question. Um.

Tianyu hardly seemed bothered by the treatment—in fact, on some level, he almost appeared to enjoy it. He certainly gave no evidence that he had learned his lesson.

When Maomao returned to the court medical office, she found her younger colleague Yo in the medical supply room. She had taken to the work quickly, and handled restocking the medicines when Maomao wasn't there.

"We just restocked, Maomao," she said. "Do me a favor and take the inventory, would you?"

“Sure.”

Her clever junior colleague had picked up the basics of the job, no problem. She even did things like wash the bandages and sheets and disinfect the instruments without being badgered to do so.

Having solid fundamentals is so important.

No matter how clever someone might be, they were no good at all if they didn’t listen. And speak of the devil, just such a no-good person appeared at that very moment.

“Hullo there, Yo! Hi, Niang-niang! Working hard?”

There was only one person who would call Maomao by that name: Tianyu himself. She considered simply ignoring him, but then, remembering what Senior Wan-wan had asked of her, she clenched her fist and gave it a gentle shake.

“My, Tianyu,” she said, “your face is practically gaunt. Are you eating all right?”

“Oh, yeah. Dr. Liu lets me eat with him.”

Dr. Liu, unable to let Tianyu remain a stray, had taken him in and was looking after him himself. Domesticating him, however, seemed an impossible task.

Maomao was well acquainted with how difficult it was to get a rise out of Tianyu.

But I have ways!

She’d brought a special tool just for this.

“I see,” she said sympathetically. She produced a big basket. And what was inside the basket?

“Wh—Why that’s...!”

It held a large chicken she’d bought on the way back from the clinic. Headless, plucked, and bled, it did still have the organs inside, so she wanted to hurry up and prepare it.

This wasn’t a tender young bird, but an old hen that had ceased laying eggs, so it was sure to be packed with flavor. If stewed patiently with some egg and kudzu powder to give it starchiness, it would be a taste sensation.

Given how often she went from the clinic to the court and back, it wasn’t unusual for Maomao to be asked to shop for dinner. If she made chicken soup for the medical office, not only would the physicians be grateful, but she would probably get some money to cover dinner expenses.

Two birds, so to speak, with one stone.

The possibility of soup for dinner, however, was not what commanded Tianyu's attention.

"Oooh, Niang-niang! I'm begging you, *please* let me chop up that chicken!" He pressed his hands to his cheeks and squirmed demonstratively. His eyes, which usually looked as engaged as a fish's, now glowed fiercely.

Dr. Liu knew very well that a simple pay cut would never be enough to teach Tianyu anything.

There's a different way to make him feel the pain.

One denied Tianyu the opportunity to do his beloved dissections. It was during surgery that he had made his unpardonable gaffe, so not only was he forbidden from doing surgeries for the immediate future, he wasn't even allowed near an operating room. No human autopsies—not even any rendering of animals. And his lack of a salary meant he couldn't buy himself meat to dissect at market.

Maomao gathered that when the withdrawal symptoms got too bad, Dr. Liu would sometimes spare him an edible frog.

"Please, *please* let me cut up that bird! I'll do the nicest job of it you've ever seen! Pleeeease, Maomaaaooo!"

So he *could* use her real name, when it mattered to him.

"No, I think not," she replied. Under normal circumstances, she might have appreciated the time and trouble it would save her, but today she planned to wring this bird for all the torment it was worth.

She pointedly tapped a water jug. "Oh, yes! I need some water. A whole jugful!"

"Give it here! I'll do it for you! Come on, pretty please?"

"And the laundry is really piling up..."

"I'll get right on it!"

Sufficient torment resulted in Tianyu fetching the water *and* doing the laundry for her.

Once he'd obtained his prize, Tianyu stood with the chicken in his hands, panting hard. It was not a good look. He appeared downright perverse, in fact.

Since, thanks to Tianyu, Maomao's work was done sooner than usual, she decided to devote a few minutes to some medical "housework." Yo sat beside her and started rolling up the freshly washed bandages. In the next

room, Tianyu was demonstrating brilliant knife skills as he finally began to work on the chicken. He separated it into pieces, perfectly following the sinews.

“I want to use the thigh for stir-fry, so cut it into bite-sized pieces,” Maomao instructed. “I’m going to steam the tenders, and the rest...maybe skewers. I’m going to stew the organs all together, so just drop them in the stewpot there. No need to do anything special to them. And as for the bones, let’s stew them with some onion, if you would.”

“I’m on it!”

Maomao handled the seasonings herself. Her dormmate En’en was a better cook, but she wasn’t there today, so Maomao had to make do.

“Are you sure about this?” Yo whispered to her. “I thought Dr. Liu said he couldn’t...”

“We have to throw him a bone every once in a while. Otherwise he looks like he might just take apart the nearest human, don’t you think?”

“S... Surely you jest...”

No, he’d do it.

Tianyu was just that dangerous. That’s why you had to know just how to handle his reins.

“Make sure you skim off the scum,” she told Tianyu.

“Yeah, I know.”

As they were working, the elderly doctor came in and sniffed the air. “My, my. And what’s for dinner tonight?” he asked.

“Egg soup with chicken,” Maomao replied.

“Ooh! Need some cloud ear mushrooms, by any chance?”

“If you have any, I’ll gladly take them. And some ginger would be great.”

The elderly doctor took a dried, black fungus out of the medical cabinet. This wily physician didn’t shy from appropriating medicinal herbs to serve as ingredients. He excused it by saying that part of his job was to make sure the doctors stayed healthy.

Maomao plopped the fungus into the hot water, adding wine and salt to the soup to give it some flavor.

As far as the chicken stir-fry, she would pair it with whatever vegetables happened to be around. Once the stew had boiled, she would add some ginger to take off the gaminess. Then she could have Yo put any leftover

meat on skewers.

“Master Physician, don’t you think it would be all right to have a field around here? It would be the perfect place...” Maomao ventured. There was plenty of open space around the medical office that got excellent sunlight. Maomao, for one, thought it would be excellent if they could get garden-fresh onions or garlic chives. And it would be the perfect opportunity to plant plenty of medicinal herbs as well.

“Afraid not. Not after what the last palace lady we left in charge of a garden did.”

“Yeah, point taken.”

That palace lady had been Suirei, a partisan of the Shi clan who had conspired to assassinate the emperor. Officially, she was no longer supposed to exist.

The old doctor continued to take liberal sniffs of the air as he read a letter. “You there, young lady. You’re Yo, yes?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hmm. May I have a moment?”

“What is it, sir?”

The old doctor showed the letter not to Maomao, but to Yo. Consumed by curiosity, Maomao came over to look.

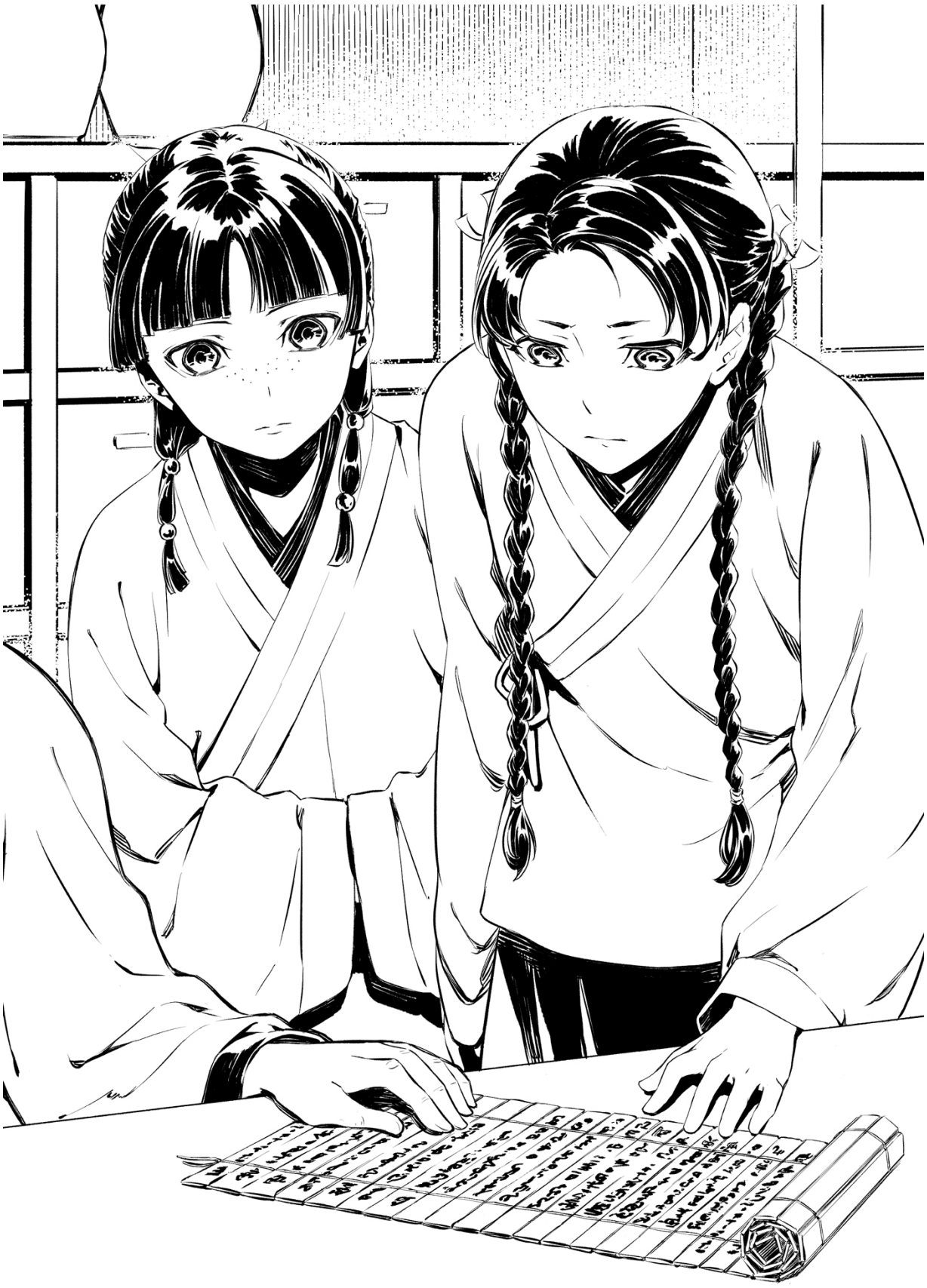
The letter was from a physician who worked in the provinces. They were all referred to as court physicians, but many of them were sent to distant regions to work once they became full-fledged doctors.

“I don’t believe it!” Yo said, going pale.

“Yes, indeed... I do think this could become a spot of trouble,” the elderly physician agreed.

The letter said that the physician was witnessing an increase in patients with blisters. That by itself might not have meant much to Maomao—but in the company of Yo and the elderly physician, she put the pieces together.

Both of them had had smallpox—and it was very possible that was what the blisters were.



Chapter 2: Lahan’s Family Tree

Several days later, the elderly physician summoned Yo again, this time to go on a trip. “We’ll be away for a while. You can manage with Dr. Li and Dr. Wang, can’t you?”

“Why’d he take Yo?” asked the increasingly muscular Dr. Li.

“Search me,” replied Senior Wan-wan, sipping his tea. He and Dr. Li were evidently from the same cohort, and chatted amiably whenever they saw each other. Today, Senior Wan-wan was enjoying some relaxation with a tea break. Maomao was preparing the drinks, like some sort of underling.

“You know anything, Maomao?” Dr. Li asked her.

I sure do.

In consideration of Yo, she wasn’t sure she should say anything. At the same time, she knew both of these physicians to be excellent people. And she concluded that now that Yo had been invited on this trip, the truth would come out eventually. So she said, “Yo has had smallpox before. A few days ago, we received a letter describing a patient with symptoms that could be smallpox. I assume that’s why he chose her.”

“Smallpox! That would explain it.”

“Yeah. I’ve never had it, myself.”

Smallpox was widely feared: It was both highly contagious and frequently fatal, and even if you survived, it could leave scars on your face or body. However, once you’d had the disease, you were unlikely ever to catch it again. These were fundamental things that every doctor would have learned.

“Are we sure it’s smallpox, though?” Senior Wan-wan asked.

“If we’re lucky, maybe it’s just chickenpox,” Maomao replied. “But I assume he took Yo just to be safe.”

There was no cure for smallpox. Perhaps it simply hadn’t been discovered yet, but it wasn’t as though Maomao was going to happen upon it right now. If she had gone with them, she would only have gotten in the

way, and might very well have ended up sick herself.

She produced some sweet potatoes she had steamed while boiling the tea.

“O-Oh, p-potatoes,” Dr. Li muttered.

“Oh! Potatoes!” exclaimed Senior Wan-wan.

Their differing reactions could be explained by Dr. Li’s experiences in the famine-struck western capital region. He’d eaten an endless parade of potatoes and had developed something of an aversion.

“These came from Lahan’s Brother. They were grown by Lahan’s Father, I believe,” Maomao said.

“Ah, new elements of Lahan’s family tree emerge,” Dr. Li said.

“Who’s this Lahan guy?” Senior Wan-wan asked. “Does he have a mother and a sister too?”

Lahan’s Brother had been something of a fact of life in the western capital, but in the imperial capital, his fame was next to nothing. He was, as his moniker implied, Lahan’s older brother, as well as a true pro farmer who had proven his worth in the west.

Wish he’d pick up a damn hoe around here! Maomao thought, but her wish seemed unlikely to come true.

“This isn’t as sweet as the last batch,” said Senior Wan-wan, munching on his potato.

“I’m told they’re sweeter if they’re kept in a somewhat cooler place. Frankly, he sent so many that they’re just in the way, so I’ll thank you to keep eating.”

From what Maomao heard, the freak strategist’s house was now all but buried in potatoes, so Yao and Maomao had been enlisted to hand them out at the medical offices.

“Maybe they could turn them into sweet treats. If they’re shorthanded, we could lend them Tianyu.” Dr. Li was rifling through the medicine cabinet to see if there might be some spices they could use to glam up their potatoes. In the western capital, they’d frequently had butter to spread on them.

“*Please* send someone more useful than Dr. Tianyu,” Maomao said. “He won’t be serious about anything but dissecting livestock.”

Indeed, it was the only thing he was good for.

“Anyway, doesn’t it seem a little unfair that he got off with nothing

more than docked pay and a bit of collegial abuse? I mean, after what he did...” Maomao said.

“Oh, you haven’t heard?” Senior Wan-wan asked, peeling the skin off his potato. “Tianyu’s already been whipped.”

Maomao frowned. “Excuse me? Is that for real? I never heard anything about that...and he’s been so peppy that I never would have guessed.”

“A hundred lashes, at Dr. Liu’s suggestion—although it’s being broken up, ten lashes at a time. I guess when you give somebody all hundred at once, they tend to die in the middle of it. Which means that he’s got it so together that he can take that beating and still do all his work no problem. It’s got to be murderously painful, though.”

Dr. Li held up nine fingers: Tianyu had nine beatings left. About the time his wounds were healing, he would find himself under the lash once more.

“Don’t let him live, and don’t let him die, I think is the philosophy.”

True, six months of docked pay would be too cheap a price to pay for making light of the Emperor’s life. A hundred lashes was hardly a mild punishment, either, but Tianyu could be glad to escape with his head still on his shoulders.

“Uh-huh. But they’re not letting him off that easy. He has to log where he was whipped and the intensity of the pain.”

“I realize this isn’t very nice...but could I see the log?”

“Ask Dr. Liu,” Dr. Li suggested.

So they passed their break time in idle chatter. Dr. Li and Senior Wan-wan both helped clean up the tea implements when they were done—one reason Maomao liked them so much.

The physicians’ break was offset slightly from that of the soldiers so that right about the time they were wrapping up tea, men who had been injured in training could start trickling in.

True to form, they had just finished cleaning up when an injured man appeared.

“Right, where are you hurt?” Dr. Li asked.

“He was having a duel, and I think he took a serious blow to the head,” answered another soldier in lieu of his companion, who was quite unable to stay on his feet. Strange, though: This other soldier was dressed for the part, but didn’t seem very steady, himself.

Haven't I seen him somewhere?

Maomao was pondering the matter when the soldier spoke directly to her. "Hello, Lady Maomao. It's been much too long."

He gave her a deep, humble bow.

"That's it!"

She realized who he was: Ujun, older step-brother of the former high consort Lishu. It appeared he was still playing lackey to the soldiers.

Once Ujun had explained what had happened to the injured man and turned over whatever belongings the man needed, he left.

You know, that reminds me. I wonder how Lady Lishu and Basen are doing.

She soon dismissed the thought. It had little to do with her, so she got back to work.

Chapter 3: Red Plum Village

Her question about Basen was soon answered.

“Miss Maomao! Come on, now, Miss Maomao! Wake up your pretty self!”

The peace and quiet of her precious day off from medical assistant work was shattered by someone whose unique voice was unforgettable from the first moment one heard it.

“Miss Chue? What is it?”

The owner of the voice, who had tanned skin and a dumpling-like nose, had jumped on top of Maomao.

“Hoo hoo hoo hoo! Since you finally have a day off, Miss Chue thought it would be lovely to take a little trip with you, Miss Maomao!”

“Setting aside the question of why you know when my days off are, may I assume that forcing me to go somewhere with you means you have some kind of plan in mind?”

“Oh, heavens! Miss Chue is not that kind of cunning strategist. It’s just... Well, I *am* a bride of the Ma family. And when it comes to orders from influential people in that family—people like Miss Chue’s mother-in-law and her sister-in-law Maamei—well, Miss Chue can’t say no, ho ho!”

Maomao pondered. If Chue’s mother-in-law (that was, Taomei) and Maamei were involved, then Chue’s cavalier attitude was even harder to explain.

“May I presume this has to do with Master Basen?”

“H-How did you know?!” Chue said with theatrical shock.

Maomao felt something resembling sympathy for Basen. They weren’t particularly close, but she couldn’t help feeling bad about the way he always seemed to draw the short straw.

“Are we trying to find out something about him?”

“No, well, you see, my little brother-in-law—I was sure he seemed unusually fidgety, and it turns out he’s going to Lady Lishu’s temple today!” Chue drawled. “It’s supposedly for work, but Miss Chue can just

feel the shiver in the air! It's simply too much to take! Ergo, she came to invite you, Miss Maomao, since the alternative is you'll spend all day in idle, indolent slumber!"

The short version? She was going to go sneak and peek, and she wanted Maomao to come along.

"It's not *idle* slumber. I need my rest." Maomao got up and started to change, although she didn't look very pleased about it.

"So you're coming?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't."

Basen aside, she was genuinely curious what had become of Lishu. Maomao hadn't seen the young woman since she'd taken vows, and she hoped the former consort was getting along all right.

"It's a bit chilly, so take this robe," Chue chirped.

"Where's it from?"

"I hate to break it to you, but it's not from the Moon Prince! It's secondhand from Maamei."

That wasn't particularly disappointing news as far as Maomao was concerned; in fact, she was glad to hear it, given how nice the robe was.

"It's quite a nice robe, but Miss Chue looks best in yellow," Chue said. "Green and green-adjacent colors make her face look a bit too dark."

Maomao yawned and started in on her breakfast: leftover side dish from the night before smooshed between slices of bread.

"That looks delicious," Chue remarked. "Spare a bite?"

"I'm sure you've already had a perfectly square meal, Miss Chue. You can do without this one." She shoved Chue away as the other woman tried to snatch the sandwich out of her hands. To drive the point home, Maomao stuffed the food in her mouth—it wasn't very ladylike, but that didn't stop her from walking out of the dorm that way.

Normally Chue came by carriage, but today no conveyance was waiting for them.

"We're not taking a carriage?"

"That would be too slow. It's horseback for us!"

Chue led over a beautiful horse by the reins. No wonder she'd been afraid of her companion getting cold, Maomao realized.

They hadn't been riding for even two hours when they arrived at their

destination. True, it was faster than going by carriage, but the continual whipping of the wind was tiring. And Chue had been going at a substantial clip.

By the time they arrived, their mount glistened with sweat. Maomao let the animal lick some salt that Chue gave her, then they let it drink at a nearby watering hole.

“Is this the place?” Maomao asked.

“This is the place!”

The gate was large and grand enough, but it was noticeably old and weather-beaten. Once it had probably been brightly colored, but now only faint specks of paint still clung to it. A large nameplate hung over the gate, but the sun and the elements had faded it so badly that it was barely readable. Maomao thought she could just make out the characters *Xiaomeiguan*, Red Plum Village.

No need to remember that, she thought.

Then she trotted after Chue, who was presenting a piece of paper to the guard. He inspected it, then let them in. He made no move to show them around; they appeared to be free to go where they pleased.

“Miss Chue, Miss Chue.”

“What is it, Miss Maomao?”

Maomao looked around, and from this conventional beginning she asked, “Is this really a temple? It doesn’t have a very...temple-ish name.”

“I guess you could say it’s more of a farm.”

Indeed, so it appeared. Maomao spotted horses, cows, and even chickens, and the whole place reeked of livestock. That watering hole near the gate must have been so the animals could get a drink.

Maomao also saw a substantial farm plot planted with all manner of vegetables. Maybe the place was self-sufficient.

“Ooh... Ooooooooh!”

“Now, now, Miss Maomao. Please don’t pick any herbs you find, even if they are medicinal. This is private property and they won’t be happy with you!” Chue said, catching Maomao by the scruff of the neck and dragging her along. Her dominant hand might have been all but useless, but Chue still proved quite capable of both riding a horse and dragging Maomao away with just one arm.

Chue’s natural agility was part of the reason for her riding ability, but

the reins had also been modified so that they could affix easily to her limp right arm.

Maomao took in the idyllic scenery as they went along. “Vegetables, herbs...and a lot of very nutritious-looking animals,” she observed.

“Yes indeed!”

“You said this was a temple, but to me, it looks more like a place for rich folk to pass the time.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Everyone seems healthy and has great skin. They might look plain, but I’m guessing they’re well-fed. And the buildings are old, but they’re obviously kept up.”

Chue nodded. “You get that type sometimes—people who are tired of the hustle and bustle of the world and want to live a simple life in a rustic setting.”

There were plenty of them among the courtesans’ clients—folks who talked about their desire to move to the country and make noodles or whatever. Maomao wondered how many had actually followed through and started those noodle shops.

“You’re not exactly wrong, but it’s not quite the same thing. This is a facility where rich people like that can gather. But in a way, it’s also a gathering of wayfarers seeking to master the Way.”

“Wayfarers?” Maomao echoed, and Chue made a big, approving circle with her arms—even if it was a bit lopsided since she couldn’t really raise her right arm.

“Yep! These are people who idolize stories of immortality, of ‘gaining wings and becoming sages,’ as the saying goes. They want to know how long life can be extended through diet. I should think you might appreciate that, Miss Maomao.”

“Well, I don’t dislike it,” she admitted, and although the look in her eyes was skeptical, she couldn’t keep a bit of a grin off her face. After all, there was a lot here to appeal to her. As the saying had it, food and medicine sprang from the same source, and a person’s diet had much to do with how long they lived.

In spite of the acrid stench of livestock, the place wasn’t unhygienic. Excrement from the animals wasn’t just washed away from wherever it fell, but was collected in one place. The pile was obviously fermenting from the

inside, judging by how it emitted a white steam.

Maomao saw bulls, as well as cows with prominent udders. That told her they used milk here. There were baskets in the lake and river to serve as traps—she suspected they were catching shrimp and loach, and maybe eel. All excellent sources of nutrition. And most important of all, it occurred to Maomao: *The food around here might just be delicious!*

She started to cherish a modest hope. There was, of course, no guarantee that they would treat her to a meal. They hadn't even bothered to furnish a guide, after all—although that was partly because the women had already arrived at their destination.

"Ahh, there they are!" Chue piped up. "Look, right over there!"

In front of what looked like a large chicken coop, Maomao could see a man and a woman. One of them was Basen, the other a refined young lady.

She's really grown.

The young woman was noticeably taller than the last time Maomao had seen her. Maomao felt like she remembered the girl being shorter than she was, but now the other woman was the taller of them. Maomao suspected her small, lithe body hadn't changed. Before, her skin had been pale and her cheeks pink like cherry blossoms, but she was somewhat darker now. Her simple outfit lacked something in elegance, but it had durability to recommend it. It was patched in places, but otherwise it was perfectly good clothing.

It was her: Lishu, though no one would have guessed by looking at her that she had once been one of the high consorts, among the most influential people in the rear palace.

"Come on, Miss Maomao. This way!" Chue had a prominent branch tied to her right hand, an artful touch. Maomao wondered if there was really a point to *holding* a branch when you were already hiding behind a tree, but it was too much trouble to actually ask, so she didn't.

"I'll be counting on you for the exposition."

"Miss Maomao, do you remember suggesting to His Majesty that he should give his consort to my younger brother-in-law once he does something worthy of a reward?"

"Not very clearly, and I *definitely* don't think you were there," Maomao said, struggling to call up the memory.

"Truth be told, there aren't that many people well-placed enough to

object to whoever Lady Lishu might marry. Sure, the chattering classes will gasp and writhe, but His Majesty regards Lady Lishu like his own daughter. The leader of the U clan doesn't want his dear granddaughter living out the rest of her days as a nun, either, so I don't think anyone is upset that the Ma clan is making a move for her! If they were, they wouldn't find excuses to send my brother here on 'jobs' where he just happens to run into Lady Lishu."

Chue winked broadly at Maomao.

"Now, I wonder what they could be saying," Chue said. She proceeded to read Basen's and Lishu's lips, even doing the voices.

"*It's gotten pretty cold. Are you keeping well?*"

"*Yes, I'm all right, thank you. I'm used to the work now.*"

"You really can do anything, can't you, Miss Chue?" Maomao said.

"Oh, no! This is just something a married woman needs to know!" Chue drawled. Maomao tried to think of any other married woman she knew who could read lips.

Chue continued to convey the scene:

"*What brings you here today?*"

"*My sister told me to get another duck. I mean, we have one at home already...*"

Oh yeah. Basen did keep a duck, didn't he? Jofu or something. Maomao was surprised to realize Chue still hadn't eaten her.

A duck! What a transparent excuse.

The sister in question would have to be Maamei. She would stop at nothing to see her little brother married.

"*Oh! Your hand, once as white as an icefish, has turned so red!*"

"*An icefish! You charmer. It's my cheeks that will turn red—from embarrassment! When I see your great, broad chest, Master Basen, I feel my heart start to dance!*"

"*My dear, I feel the same! My blood runs hot—*"

Maomao looked at her narrator. "Miss Chue."

"Yes?"

"Did you get bored?"

It had not escaped Maomao that Chue had begun making up her own script at some point.

"What was I supposed to do? They're talking, but they're not *saying*

anything! How long can two people possibly talk about the weather?"

It *did* sound boring, but for these two socially awkward youngsters, getting a real conversation going was probably harder than passing the civil service exams.

God, what a pain.

Chue gave Maomao a knowing look. "You're thinking, 'Couldn't the bigwigs just order them to get together and then, boom, it's done?'"

"Yes."

"You know, a lot of us think the same thing about *you*, Miss Maomao!" Chue drawled.

Maomao pointedly looked away.

"So you see how it is. It might not be the most direct route, but they need some quiet help to find their own way to their happily ever after! And that's what you and Miss Chue are here for!"

"*I'm* here for that, huh? And what, exactly, am I supposed to do?"

"If my little brother-in-law can do some worthy deeds, everything else is simple! He just lacks self-confidence, even if he's not as bad as the Moon Prince."

Maomao thought she understood what Chue meant. There could be few soldiers in Li who matched Basen for sheer unbridled strength and boldness in the face of danger—but he was in fact a poor match when it came to serving Jinshi. Basen was a soldier, but found himself doing the work of a bureaucrat and so much more; he had a great deal to learn about politics.

Given the small, elite cadre of picked men and women who surrounded Jinshi, it was no surprise that the socially awkward Basen should feel suffocated.

"The only way this will work is if he has something that gives him courage *and* makes him justified in asking Lady Lishu for her hand. So we have to manufacture that something?"

"*Some* of us might say he just needs to man up and smooch her already! Miss Chue had to strive and struggle to win *her* man, but her little brother-in-law just won't get to the darn point!"

Quite oblivious to Maomao's and Chue's various plans and fantasies, the young people in question had begun caring for the ducks.

I thought she wasn't much for birds. Is she comfortable with them now?

There were a lot of things that could make Lishu unwell—food, birds.

Her food allergies might always be with her, but her aversion to birds, at least, appeared to have succumbed to exposure therapy. She looked much healthier than she had before.

“Can’t you think of some little incident that might help my brother-in-law find some confidence?”

“I thought he acquitted himself pretty well in the western capital. Was that not enough?”

“It was plenty, except *he* doesn’t believe he ‘acquitted himself’ at all. Besides, I’d like the Emperor and the U clan to see him in action!”

This was getting more and more complicated, Maomao thought as she looked around.

She spotted a cowshed some distance from the ducks’ house.

They have so many oxen here, at least one of them must have produced a bezoar, right?

Such were the thoughts of Maomao. Sadly, actually finding a bezoar meant cutting the animal open, so even if one of the oxen here possessed one, Maomao wouldn’t be able to get her hands on it.

“Miss Chue can’t stand it! There, see? Lady Lishu pretended to ‘accidentally’ trip, and my little brother helped her up. Oooh! If only Miss Chue could become a teasing little wind and flip up Lady Lishu’s dress!”

There was Chue, once again reminding Maomao that she was the word *crass* incarnate.

“Okay, tell me. Was there a point to us staking them out today?”

“Miss Chue needs her hobbies.”

“I’m going home.”

Maomao stood and trotted briskly back down the path they’d come up.

Chue scrambled after her. “You won’t be able to hail a carriage in this corner of nowhere!” She smirked. Maomao gave her an accusing stare: so this was why they’d come by horse. “You’re right that watching them stumble along won’t get us anywhere, so how about we devise a new strategy?”

“Yes, we could. And I don’t mind mentioning that I’ve gotten pretty hungry...”

“What a coincidence! So has Miss Chue. Sadly, while we have permission to enter Red Plum Village, that doesn’t include one of their become-an-immortal-sage meals. But maybe we could at least swing a few

souvenirs?”

Chue was holding several of what appeared to be mud balls.

“Century eggs?” Maomao asked.

“Well, I had to give up on the duck.”

“Did you steal those?”

A beat. “I’ll get my little brother to pay for them later.”

Chue tucked some of the blackened eggs into the folds of Maomao’s robe. Maomao felt like she was being bribed to stay quiet.

“I’m still going home,” she said.

“You’re no fun!”

Maomao stuck out her lip and headed for the stable where their animal had been taken. There was a man there, and despite the mean look in his eyes, he was brushing the horses with care. It was a big stable; there must have been at least ten horses there, all well muscled—obviously used for farmwork.

“Excuse meee! We’d like our horse back, please,” Chue said, and the unpleasant-looking man brought out the horse they had come on.

“Here,” he said.

“Great, thanks!”

The man, evidently dedicated to his work, went back to brushing.

“Have you been doing this a long time, mister?” Chue chirped.

“’Bout ten years.”

“What do you think about that girl who showed up a couple years ago? Lishu?”

“I was only told she’s not for the likes of me to talk to.”

“Hmm, I see!”

So people didn’t realize that she was from decent stock.

“I’ll thank yeh not to bother me while I’m working,” the man said.

“Oh, gosh, pardon me!” Chue said, sticking out her tongue in embarrassment.

One could become almost inured to beautiful women when living and working in the rear palace, but here, Lishu was like the proverbial crane in the rubbish heap, a jewel among the refuse. It would hardly surprise Maomao to learn that one or two of the men here had entertained thoughts of laying hands on her.

“I’m glad they seem to be keeping everyone in check,” Chue said with a

wink as she spurred the horse to a trot.

The day concluded with a meal, over which Maomao and Chue exchanged their share of ribald chatter, and after which they finally went home.

Why did *she want to go out there?* Maomao wondered. She had come out of the whole affair with nothing but some mud balls—er, century eggs—to show for it.

Chapter 4: Medicinal Congee

The next morning, Maomao awoke to find the air very chilly.

Oof! It's cold. She sat up sniffling. *Gotta make sure I get a comforter*, she thought, plucking her thin bedroll off the ground. She'd lent her previous bedroll to another girl while she was away in the western capital for a year, and it looked like it wasn't coming back. She wasn't thrilled about that, but she was at least grateful that everyone had left her room alone for an entire year. She wouldn't have been surprised to return to find that everything she owned had been carted off.

Maomao had no strong objections to her current work environment, but if there was one thing she didn't love about it, it was the constantly changing time of her shifts. Unlike in the pleasure district, there was no madam to come thwack you awake if you overslept. In order to make sure she wasn't late to work, Maomao had had to cultivate a habit of getting up at the same time every single day.

I start late today, so I've got some time to kill.

She would have loved to catch a few more winks, but she resisted. If she let herself slip back to sleep, she definitely wouldn't get up on time, especially not now that it was cold. She put a heavy-ish overjacket on and went to the dining hall.

"Good morning," said Changsha, Maomao's younger colleague. She was already eating breakfast. It was congee with medicinal herbs, as well as some salt and vinegar for taste. It was a very plain meal—there weren't even any side dishes—but that was what commoners ate.

Maomao, sadly, had become rather accustomed to the breakfasts of the rich, and now had to reckon with her status as a commoner. She often found her eyes going to serious-looking ingredients, only to get sticker shock when she actually reached for them.

"Good morning," she said. She would eat the same congee as Changsha. A dining hall there was, but you had to make your own food, so she and Changsha often prepared their meals together. This breakfast was

something Maomao had whipped up the night before.

“What do you think the ingredients in today’s congee are?” Maomao asked Changsha, a gentle riddle.

“Rootstock and carrot,” Changsha replied, “and, to judge by the smell, fishwort.”

“That’s right. And a bit of tea, to keep the odor down.”

Why would one deliberately use malodorous ingredients? Simply to keep the other inhabitants of the dormitory from snitching their food. Back when En’en was making meals here, things left out overnight had often been gone come morning. It was easy to assume that the other commoners in the lodgings had helped themselves, but with alarming frequency, the true culprits turned out to be young ladies from distinguished houses. The reason, they alleged, was because the meal had been made by a servant.

En’en was indeed Yao’s servant, and the mindset seemed to be that if a servant had made it, it was up for grabs. En’en, of course, was not happy.

When they were found out, a stern warning was issued: If the stealing stopped, the guilty could stay at the dorm; but if it continued, they would be chased out. The ultimate result? Only those young ladies with some life skills remained at the dorm.

Then again, it was relatively unusual for a young lady from a good background to stay in the dorms to begin with.

And En’en hardly ever left it at just making meals ahead for Yao’s sake.

The dormitory was occupied exclusively by palace ladies who had passed the examinations, but for that exact reason, there were many inexperienced chefs among its ranks. There was a dining hall, but no one to make and serve food, and the explanation was simple: Many of the palace women were there to find husbands. Thus they had to learn to cook for themselves, but the whole thing could be awfully inconvenient.

“There’s something else in it too,” Maomao prompted Changsha.

“Given the thickness and the heat... Is it kudzu?”

“Bingo.”

Kudzu warmed the body and helped prevent colds. Health was of paramount interest to Maomao; finding flavors that went well together was a secondary concern.

Changsha had a good nose as well as a sensitive tongue—everything she needed and more to become a doctor. In terms of knowledge of medicines,

at least, she was probably doing better even than Yao.

“Here, this is for you,” Maomao said, graciously handing Changsha one of the century eggs she’d gotten from Chue.

“Why, thank you.”

“Are you on the late shift today too, Changsha?”

“Yeah. Plenty of time between now and then.”

“Agreed.”

Truth be told, this was the time when Maomao most felt she could relax—but it was her bad habit that moments like this were precisely when her head would fill with all kinds of thoughts. She let her mind wander as she added an egg to her congee.

Today’s work...

She would be at the medical office the entire day. There were plenty of chores that had piled up and needed to be taken care of.

I wonder what happened to Basen after—

She could only assume it had gone nowhere. Maomao was content to wait for communications from Chue rather than taking any initiative herself.

Just one other thing.

“Changsha.”

“Yes?”

“Is Yo back yet?”

She’d gone to see patients in the countryside with the elderly doctor several days before.

“She wasn’t back yesterday. I wonder why he took her with him.”

“Maybe she’s the most fit for the job.”

Maomao had been willing to tell Dr. Li and Senior Wan-wan about Yo’s history, but for the time being she would refrain from mentioning it to Changsha. She was a young woman of the same age; it might make Yo uncomfortable.

“And are Yao and En’en doing well?”

Maomao wasn’t in the same department, so she didn’t see much of them. If she was ever going to bump into them, it would probably be at the laundry area, but it was so cold that she was always in a hurry to get the job done and head back—so there was hardly any opportunity to meet the other young ladies.

“Yes, they’re well. There was a soldier who sought Yao’s hand, so En’en was at her scariest all day yesterday.”

Yao was of an appropriate age to get married, and had a very womanly body. Not only that, but she was the daughter of a well-established family. Normally, one might have expected her to be here polishing her manners, or else actively in search of a husband, so it wasn’t hard to see why she was so popular with the men.

Even if she doesn’t seem to realize it herself.

“I wish they wouldn’t do that in the workplace,” Maomao said. She held up her congee bowl at an angle, scraping out the very last spoonfuls.

Chapter 5: The Doctors' Conference

After breakfast, Maomao trotted over to work, in no particular hurry. When she got there, however, she found a sign on the door of the medical office stating that it was temporarily closed.

What's this all about?

She nudged open the door experimentally for a peek and saw the physicians sitting around the table. Dr. Liu was presiding, which told Maomao that this was no ordinary matter.

There hadn't been any meetings scheduled for today. The old doctor was there, and everyone's eyes were on him.

Oh. He came back.

Yo was with him, though she was glancing around as if unsure she really belonged in this company. When she saw Maomao, relief flooded her eyes and her face relaxed.

I wonder what happened.

Maomao slipped into the room as casually as she could. She had been around longer than Yo, and it made her a bit bolder. Dr. Liu gave her a look of annoyance, but didn't send her away. Instead, he began the meeting. Maomao stuck around: She was supposed to be on shift right now, anyway. If she didn't join the meeting, she would just be bored.

"I apologize that this has taken as long as it has," the elderly doctor began. "We needed a few days to see how we looked, ourselves. Closer to ten would have been ideal, but I hope you'll humor me in this case."

The old physician was wearing thick gloves and had a cloth over his mouth, as did Yo. They were clearly trying to prevent the spread of something contagious—in this case, from themselves to the other doctors.

"We're all aware of that. Please just state your conclusions," Dr. Liu said testily.

"It was smallpox. Not too many infected yet, but whether it spreads will be decided in large part by whether appropriate measures are taken."

Smallpox!

Maomao's worst fears turned out to be true.

"If it becomes an epidemic, infected people will find their way to the capital. We have to be ready."

"Are we going to be safe?" one of the younger physicians asked anxiously.

"We'll *make* things safe. Don't you get it?" The answer came from Dr. Liu, and he was not mincing words. The younger man flinched.

"Have you gathered the symptomatic patients in one place?"

"Yeah. And I temporarily cordoned off the village, no one in or out. I left a couple of doctors there, but we're going to need more soon. And I wouldn't mind some soldiers to serve as lookouts. Smallpox has a long incubation period, so the place needs to be isolated for two weeks at least."

"You want new people?"

"Well, you can't go, Liu. Just imagine if any got on the Emperor's spoon! And anyway, you've never had smallpox, have you?" The old physician shook his head. "I want us to find all the doctors and soldiers who have had smallpox before. Patient types, hopefully."

"Do you know where the infection came from?" Dr. Liu asked.

Yo flinched at the question, but Maomao thought, *It didn't have anything to do with you. Don't worry.*

Yo and her family had been infected a long time ago. There was no way they were the origin of this outbreak. At the same time, Yo was on tenterhooks trying to prevent the others from learning that she was a former smallpox sufferer herself.

"Surely I needn't tell *you* there's no way to know. I'm less interested in figuring out who started it than I am in doing what needs to be done!"

"Fair point. Sorry." Dr. Liu was not above apologizing when the other person was right.

"All right. I need you to squeeze the higher-ups for some hazard pay for any officials and soldiers to be sent to the village. That's all you can do for us right now, Liu."

"Very well. I'm sorry for always giving you the short straw."

"Oh, please. Compared to Luomen, I'm the luckiest man alive. Now, there's a sad sack. Bad luck seems to follow him like a cloud."

"True enough."

Maomao hadn't expected to hear her adoptive father's name in this

context, and couldn’t help turning up her nose like a cat who’d smelled a foul odor.

“So there you have it. I know you’re all worried, but there’s not a whole hell of a lot you can do, so just carry on as normal. Anyone who winds up with me, work your hearts out. I hear Dr. Liu is going to give you double pay, so act like it!”

The elderly physician had deftly brought some composure back to an increasingly grim conference.

He does good work.

Yo still looked uneasy, but with him by her side she had nothing to worry about.

“The soldiers are one thing,” Dr. Liu said, “but are there *any* civil officials who have already had smallpox?” He crossed his arms. There were already fewer bureaucrats than soldiers, meaning any given fraction of them would be smaller in proportion. “Anyone at all?”

“Some seem to be hiding a history of pox, but I doubt they’d come with of their own accord. We’d still need a few more doctors, anyway. Anybody know anyone?”

Now Dr. Liu and the elderly physician both looked put out.

Maomao scratched her chin—then raised her hand. “Would a commoner be acceptable?”

Yo looked at her. She already knew who Maomao had in mind.

“Commoner? You’re not thinking of some shaman, are you?”

“He’s a weirdo, but not a shaman, sir.”

She didn’t blame Dr. Liu for asking. There were a great many dubious characters among the ranks of commoner physicians.

“If it’s some other La clanner, I don’t want to know,” he replied. He turned a look of utmost skepticism upon Maomao.

“N-No. This man can do it.”

The trembling voice was Yo’s. She was sure now who Maomao intended to introduce to the physicians.

“You know this person?” Dr. Liu asked.

“Yes, sir.”

Only then did Yo roll up her sleeves to reveal the hidden smallpox scars to the room. There was a bit of murmuring.

“I survived having smallpox thanks to him.”

“All right,” Dr. Liu said. Yo’s conviction appeared to have reached him. “Let’s get in touch with him, at least.”

“Yes, sir,” Maomao said.

Chapter 6: The Interview

Maomao knew only one commoner doctor who was well-versed in smallpox: Kokuyou.

He was a young man with smallpox scars covering half his face, although he never seemed to take his own misfortune too seriously.

The moment the conference was over, Maomao sent Kokuyou a letter. Yo could just as easily have done it, but since it was Maomao's idea, she took the job on herself.

Awesome! came the response. *I'll be there! Heck yeah!*

Just what Maomao had expected.

"Very doctor-like," Yo scoffed when she saw the letter.

This was a man who had once gone so far as to dress up as a woman in hopes of taking the palace ladies' examination. He would never refuse a summons from on high.

Along with Kokuyou's message, however, came a letter from Sazen.

"Sazen... He's the one who's running your apothecary shop now, isn't he?" Yo said, studying the letter with some confusion. It was substantially longer than Kokuyou's.

Together they read it. Together they fell silent, moved to real pity by its contents. The gist of it was: *Please don't take Kokuyou from me!* There were tearstains on the letter, and the tone was something like a wife desperately trying to prevent her husband from being sent to war.

"When did Sazen get married to a doctor?"

"No idea."

Maomao wasn't sure if Yo was joking or not, but she had been to the Verdigris House's apothecary shop before, so she ought to know that Sazen was a fully grown man.

It sounded like Sazen was dependent on Kokuyou. Although Maomao felt bad for abandoning him, it would be a good chance to separate them for a while.

In any event, Kokuyou himself was all on board, so it would be simple

enough to ignore Sazen and have him come to the palace at the earliest possible opportunity.

The interviewers would be Maomao's old man (that was, Luomen), Dr. Liu, the elderly doctor, and another of the upper physicians.

The elderly doctor had decided to wait to see Kokuyou before he went back to the village. Since Kokuyou would be working directly under him, he wanted to know whom he was dealing with.

As the ones who had recommended Kokuyou, Maomao and Yo sat in a corner of the room, where they would act as notetakers.

Kokuyou wore his typical shit-eating grin. He'd put on somewhat nicer clothes than usual, and once he was seated in front of the interviewers, he removed the cloth covering half his face. His naturally handsome looks made the scars all the more striking.

"I'm Kokuyou," he said. "Pleasure to meet you."

"We heard you're experienced in the treatment of smallpox. Is that true?" asked Dr. Liu, getting the ball rolling.

"You can see my experience right in front of you. My instructor in the medical arts exposed me to pus from a smallpox patient. I developed the disease, and...well, you can see the results. I was real lucky I didn't die!"

As usual, he didn't pull punches when talking about the rough parts of his life.

“This was an anticontamination measure that turned serious?” Luomen asked.

“No, I had a younger twin brother. My instructor wanted to see how children raised in the same environment would respond to stronger or weaker poison in the pus. I happened to get the stronger dose, which is probably why I was infected.”

In other words, he was stating on the record that this wasn’t to prevent infection; it was human experimentation. The court physicians had done patient trials at the clinic in town, but nothing so awful as what Kokuyou’s instructor had undertaken.

“And what *was* the result?” Dr. Liu asked.

“I got a serious case, while my brother just had a mild fever. He didn’t even get any scars!”

“Where did this man get the pus he administered to your brother?”

“And where is that doctor now?”

The physicians had been distracted from their interview by interest in the experiments that had been done on Kokuyou. Maomao was curious, herself.

“Oh, my mentor’s dead! He didn’t leave any written records, either, and I didn’t understand any of it, which put me in a real bind!”

“Your brother doesn’t know what was done to him, either?”

“He’s dead too! Oh boy, did he freak out when he saw my face! Stabbed our mentor right to death! That’s why there’s no records. Then later, in a fit of conscience, he hanged himself!”

There was a collective stunned silence.

That’s savage, Maomao thought. She’d known that Kokuyou’s mentor had died, but the circumstances were vastly more awful than she’d imagined.

Yo looked pale, and the physicians were edging away from Kokuyou.

Only Luomen sat still, regarding him with pity. Maomao’s adoptive father was acquainted with sorrows himself, but Kokuyou might have had just as much grief in his life as Luomen.

“That was more than ten years ago,” Kokuyou said. “I’ve been investigating my mentor’s research ever since then, but it’s a tough nut to crack. I brought my notes about everything I’ve learned and discovered about communicable diseases. Wanna see them?”

Dr. Liu took the papers without a word and began looking through them. He showed them to Luomen, and then to the other doctors. Kokuyou might sound like he wasn't quite all there, but his notes were thorough and precise, and the elderly physician in particular could be seen to nod several times.

Man, I wanna know what's in there!

Maomao shifted from side to side, desperate to get a glimpse, but it was no use. She would have to get Kokuyou to show her the notes later.

She glanced over at Yo and saw the other young woman was still not looking very well. Maomao shook her shoulder gently. "We're not done recording," she said.

"R... Right." Yo quickly got her brush moving again. Maomao suspected Kokuyou's revelations about his past had included things Yo herself hadn't known.

"What's this about 'lifetime immunity'?" the old doctor asked.

"It's a phrase my mentor used sometimes. It means that once you get a disease, you can never get it again as long as you live. When I translated it from my mentor's language, I figured that was about the right expression."

"Are you *positive* the disease can never be caught a second time?"

"Oh, you can never be positive, but at least in my case, I've been taking smallpox scabs and introducing them to myself every three years without catching it again. I've been to a lot of villages with smallpox, too, but I've never once heard someone say that they got the disease a second time. With enough data, I guess there might be exceptions, but for now I'm operating on the assumption that once you've had smallpox, you can't get it again."

Kokuyou refused to state the matter unequivocally—which, paradoxically, made him the more persuasive.

The four doctors appeared to be of one mind.

"May we copy this material into a book?" Dr. Liu asked.

Kokuyou grinned but didn't answer.

Dr. Liu held up five fingers. "We'll pay you fifty silver pieces."

"Yes, sir!"

Kokuyou turned out to have a surprisingly sharp sense for money. Maomao knew it from experience: She'd found herself having to give way to him on negotiations more than once.

"Another thing," Dr. Liu said. "The site of this project is in the

provinces. You'd be away from the capital and living in a rural area, possibly for a long time. Is that acceptable?"

Once again Kokuyou only smiled.

The doctors looked at each other, perplexed, and Maomao signaled to them with a hand gesture suggesting *money*. They still hadn't told Kokuyou how much he would make for his troubles.

"We'll pay you two silver pieces per day."

Kokuyou continued grinning and sat perfectly still. Only the tips of his fingers twitched.

He's going to wring out more than I even make! Maomao thought, observing the conversation with a certain amount of irritation.

"How about two and a half—no, three pieces?"

Still Kokuyou didn't move. The offer was already far more than what a novice medical officer would make per day.

The number was presumably so high because they were dragging an outsider into the middle of a crisis. Dr. Liu had a good deal of authority, it was true, but if he simply made a snap executive decision, the department that held the purse strings would not be impressed. Ordinarily, one would observe the situation and raise the offer gradually.

"Fine! Five pieces!" Dr. Liu said, forced into a lavish offer.

At last Kokuyou nodded.

"A-Are they sure about that? Five pieces of silver is like what an upper physician makes, isn't it?" Yo asked Maomao with a worried nudge.

"That's the kind of salary you can command when you're irreplaceable. If it were a product he was selling, he could ask for ten or maybe even a hundred times the normal price."

Maomao had to admit, though, to being impressed at how Kokuyou had held his nerve in the face of Dr. Liu.

"Then it's settled. Five pieces," Dr. Liu said.

"No," said Kokuyou, and just as even Dr. Liu flinched, thinking he was about to raise the price again, Kokuyou held up three fingers. "I don't need five pieces. Three would make me perfectly happy. And I'm sure that will be separate from my room, board, and the carriage to transport me, won't it?"

"Yes, of course, we can do that for you."

"And I'll get regular days off, won't I?"

“You’ll get days off, but we’ll expect you to work when there aren’t enough hands. We’ll give you an extra per diem if that happens. Lastly, once you join the work, you won’t be at liberty to leave again for fear of spreading infection. You can live with that?”

“Sure! That goes without saying.”

Kokuyou smiled broadly.

The other physicians looked deeply relieved.

Chapter 7: Materials

Once the interview was over, Maomao was entrusted with seeing to Kokuyou. Before he went to the worksite, he would need a physician's uniform, a minimum of equipment, and so on.

"Hoo hoo hoo! What good fortune, getting a chance to take on a job for His Majesty. And I get to be with Yo too!"

"I admit I'm excited at the prospect of working with the doctors, but this isn't going to be fun and games," Yo said with an exasperated smile. Some jobs were said to be workplaces where "the fun never stops." This wasn't going to be one of them.

"How is the place looking right now?" Maomao asked, fishing for details.

"It's a small farming village, maybe a hundred people."

"Kudos to you for noticing the smallpox patients before it spread."

In a worst-case scenario, the whole village could have vanished off the map without anyone even knowing. Much as Yo's own village had.

"Yes. I think we were extremely lucky. At the moment there are only one or two new patients per day. But the village has been quarantined, so things are turning ugly. Frustration and anger are mounting day by day."

"You haven't actually done examinations on patients yet, have you, Yo?"

"No. I was simply told to go as Dr. Lao's assistant. He's been very considerate of me, so I think I've had it pretty easy. He's letting me stay at a house outside the village."

Oh yeah. The old doctor's name was Dr. Lao...which literally meant *Dr. Old*. Of course Maomao could remember a direct superior's name.

It was probably the second-easiest name to remember behind Senior Wan-wan: Through simple association, Maomao had come to think of Dr. Lao as "the old doctor." She'd overheard other physicians referring to him as "Gramps" when he wasn't around.

"If we get more patients, I can only assume I'll have to start doing

examinations," Yo said.

Maomao pondered a moment, then decided to take the direct route. "If you're not comfortable with it, you could just quit."

"Thank you, but no. This is something I can do because of who I am. I don't get that many chances to do something you can't, Maomao!" Yo rolled up her sleeves with a hint of pride to show her scars.

"If that's how you feel, fine."

Maomao was worried about more than an outbreak of disease, however. The isolated townspeoples' pent-up frustrations could all too easily be turned on the doctors on-site. And they would start with whomever looked most vulnerable.

"My dad said he would start coming with us. Partly because Dr. Lao asked him—but the pay is great, so he's more than happy."

Yo's family had moved to the capital with their village's surviving children. This might be the best chance they would ever have to save up some money to put food on the table.

"That reminds me, Kokuyou. Are you really happy getting three silver pieces for your salary?" Maomao asked.

"Oh, yeah! It's sure better than what I make poking my head in at the apothecary shop in the pleasure district!" he chirped as he tried the fit of some uniforms.

Gee, sorry we're so cheap, Maomao thought, smiling tightly. *I guess Sazen will have to manage somehow.*

Sazen didn't have a very high opinion of himself, but he was a decent medicine man. His problem was that he didn't believe failure was ever an option. But medicine varied from person to person—what worked for one might not work for another. No need to overthink it. As long as you were attentive to when a drug wasn't doing its job and dropped it, things would work out.

"Still, that...Dr. Liu, was it?" Kokuyou said. "He did offer me a whole five silver pieces. Awfully nice of him!"

Ah. So Kokuyou had been playing tough as a test of Dr. Liu.

"He's a superb physician," Maomao said. "Even if he is awfully strict."

Dr. Liu stood side by side with Luomen among the most famous medical practitioners in Li.

"He may be strict, but he understood what he was getting with me, and I

sure appreciate that. You'll find people out there who want to work you like a dog for a few copper coins. But he's giving me a proper salary, and even offered me fifty silver pieces to copy my records. I better make sure I earn my keep! That's only right when someone's given you that sort of vote of confidence."

"And what would be right if they didn't?"

"Give 'em what they pay for!"

That sounded ominous. Maomao chose not to press the subject. "I think they'll run you ragged if you let them."

"If they do, maybe I'll ask for that pay bump to five pieces!"

"I sure hope you get that raise."

"I wonder if I'd just be making life harder."

Getting a raise was another way of saying you were going to be busier. More smallpox patients would be nothing but hell on earth.

"Kokuyou, can I see those records sometime too?" Maomao asked.

Even the upper physicians had been intrigued by them. They must be worth looking at. It was possible she could get them to show her the copy that they made, but it would be quicker to go right to the source. She didn't know how long it would be before she could see the physicians' copy.

"Sure. All you have to do is give me fifty silver pieces."

"Urk..."

That would be two or three months' salary for Maomao. Not money she could just go throwing around.

"Maybe I could get the friends-and-family rate?" She rubbed her hands together pleadingly.

"Gee, I don't know..."

Kokuyou gave the material of the doctor's uniform an experimental feel.

It was dawning on Maomao that he might be as tough a negotiator as Lahan ever was.

How much was the friends-and-family rate? Kokuyou eventually agreed to show Maomao his notes for ten silver pieces. Maomao would have liked a further discount, but that was already a fifth of what the doctors were paying, so she told herself not to be greedy. Not to mention she wanted to stay on good terms with Kokuyou for a while yet.

"I keep a copy myself, just in case. Wanna look at that?" he said.

“Yes!”

Maomao took his sheaf of notes and paid him on the spot.

“I didn’t think you’d pay right away,” Kokuyou said, impressed.

Again, Maomao could have waited to see the physicians’ copy, but there were two considerations: She wanted to see the notes as soon as possible, and she wanted to see them in Kokuyou’s own hand.

Ten silver pieces is really freaking expensive. Then again...

Kokuyou was particular about money, but he wasn’t a skinflint. Maomao saw that he was simply using money as an easy way to judge how people valued him.

He might sound flippant, but he had deep medical knowledge and an analytical cast of mind. If someone kept trying to lowball him just because they were “negotiating,” he wasn’t above simply disappearing. There was no end of examples, courtesan and customer alike, of those who found themselves cut loose when they looked down on their partner once too often.

People like Kokuyou, who could be generous with those who had treated them poorly, were not kind. It was exactly because they had so little attachment to people that they could do that. That was something Maomao wanted to remember.

Maomao sat in the dormitory dining hall, reading Kokuyou’s notes and nodding along. She was here and not in her own room because the dining hall was brighter and warmer. She’d just shelled out ten silver pieces for these notes; she wanted to economize on oil for light and coal for the brazier.

“Maomao, what’s that?” Changsha asked, peeking over her shoulder.

I should charge her for looking, Maomao thought, but she knew that the junior ladies made even less than she did. Changsha also made dinner more often than Maomao, so she would allow her this glimpse.

“They’re materials about contagious diseases. It might come in handy for us. Want to take a look?”

“May I?” Changsha said, almost glowing. What a good little girl!

Nothing like the girls who show up in the pleasure district.

They were all sold off the moment they got there. Some of them were poor farmers’ daughters, or the children of merchants who had fallen on hard times. Whatever the case, there was no use sulking about it. There

were nice kids sometimes, but if they clung to “common sense” for too long, they would never last. That wasn’t to say that the girls who became courtesans were unpleasant, only that Changsha was blessed by comparison.

Kokuyou was a remarkably talented writer. Maomao also noticed words in a foreign language jotted here and there in his notes.

Stuff like this is why I wanted to see the original manuscript.

She knew that Kokuyou’s mentor in the medical arts had been from another country, so it was only natural that his medical vocabulary included some foreign words.

“Smallpox,” Changsha said. “Do you think Yo’s doing all right?”

“I saw her today, and she seems to be holding up well. But the situation is rough.”

Changsha and Yo seemed to be good friends. They frequently found themselves assigned to different tasks when it came to learning about medicine, but Maomao gathered that they had spent several of their days off going out together.

“Us worrying about her won’t help anything. We just have to do what we can,” Maomao said.

“Good point. Which reminds me...” Changsha changed the subject, perhaps in hopes of making herself feel a little better. “I’d like to tell you that Yao and En’en are the same as always, but...”

“But what?”

“They actually had an argument the other day. Even I know that’s strange.”

What could possibly have inspired an argument between the two of them? Maomao could see Yao getting annoyed, but En’en would never contradict her mistress.

Except about one thing, maybe.

“Was this about a man, by any chance?”

“That’s right. If you’ll forgive my saying so, Yao isn’t very good with this stuff, is she?”

“You can tell?” Maomao said, promptly betraying her agreement.

“Yes... And would she happen to be in love with someone named Lahan?”

She was so very right. Maomao actually felt bad for Yao. Yao tried to

hide it—or maybe she didn't even realize herself.

"I'm not sure I'd say in *love*, exactly. Wait...you even know about Lahan?"

Maomao didn't know whether Yao herself had acknowledged her own romantic feelings at this point. Surely their object didn't have to be Lahan, of all people!

"I do. En'en mentions his name all the time—and she looks mad as a devil when she does it. I got the gist of the situation from what I heard of their argument. Pretty bold stroke, isn't it? Coming up with a reason to live in the house of the man you have a crush on? The argument was about whether it was time for them to move out."

"I agree. It absolutely is."

En'en wanted to get Yao away from that house before she put a name to how she felt about Lahan. Maomao nodded: This made good sense.

"I've also figured out that En'en only has eyes for Yao. Once in a while men come asking after her, but she shreds them so mercilessly it hurts to see."

"Uh-huh. For sure."

Lahan's Brother's face flashed through Maomao's mind. His real name was Kan something-or-other. Oddly enough, as repugnant as En'en might find Lahan, she was considering his brother as a potential match for Yao. A double dose of unhappiness for him.

"I'm not sure Yao is as smart as she thinks, either," Changsha continued. "You can move into someone's house to be closer to them, but first there has to be someone there with whom love can bloom. I think most people would just find somebody like that an intrusive nuisance. Sure, Yao is from a good family, and has the money and the looks, so men who aren't in the middle of that situation are probably jealous. But this Lahan doesn't seem to have any interest in her. It must be unbearable!"

Maomao looked at Changsha, agog at this un-sugarcoated assessment.

I take it back. So much for a good little girl.

She was open-eyed about her seniors' shortcomings and could articulate them clearly. It only went to show that she'd passed the palace ladies' examination on the merits of her own intelligence—but it was also a little scary.

Even I pick and choose who I talk to like that, she thought.

Just to be sure, she said, “You haven’t said any of this to Yao or En’en, have you?”

“No, not yet.” Changsha shook her head. Maomao felt a rush of relief. But then Changsha went on. “But for both their sakes I think she needs to either step up, tell him how she feels, and face the inevitable rejection—or let that infatuation go. Otherwise this will never end. And I think the quickest thing would be for somebody to say something about it, but Yao is so stubborn that there’s no good way.”

Maomao agreed with that too.

“En’en would never say it to her face, and even if she did, Yao would just brush her off. After all, they had a fight just from some roundabout discussion about moving.”

Maomao doubted it had escalated to the level of an actual fight. En’en would feel too much regret.

“There’s one other way the problem might be resolved, but I think it’s the least likely of all.”

“Ahh... You mean for him to fall in love with her too?”

“Yes.”

Maomao shook her head. No way. Not Lahan, of all people.

“You don’t think this Lahan man might eventually cave?”

“Knowing that the world’s scariest sister-in-law, by the name of En’en, would be part of the deal?”

“A frightening thought, I admit...”

They had been talking so long that most of the diners had filtered out of the dining hall. The dormitory aunties were giving them looks, silently urging them to show themselves out sooner rather than later.

“What do you say we get to bed?” Maomao stood up, clasping the notes.

Which was when she heard unmistakable pitter-pattering footsteps.

“Goooooood day!”

And there was the unmistakable drawl. It could only be Chue.

“We’re well past the point of *good day*. The sun has been down for ages,” Maomao said. She smelled trouble. “Go back to your room, Changsha. You’ve got an early morning tomorrow, right?”

“Yep. Thanks.” Changsha obligingly left, although she looked very curious about what was going on.

“All right, what is it now?” Maomao asked. “Are we going to spy on

Master Basen again? I assume he's not skulking around at this hour. I can't even picture him being smooth enough to invite a girl out at night."

"Oh, no. If my little brother were capable of a midnight assignation or a lovers' tryst, poor Miss Chue wouldn't have to work so hard! You think I could bring him by the Verdigris House to get some practice?"

I'm sure my sister Pairin would love to teach him...

"Definitely *don't* do that, please. If he went berserk and smashed up our building, I would be the one the old bat took for her punching bag."

Who knew how much the old madam would expect her to pay in compensation?

"Too bad. But I'm not here to chat about my brother today! There's been a little problem, and I'd like you to come with me to the Moon Prince's place!"

"May I ask what kind of problem?"

Jinshi didn't summon Maomao nearly as often as he used to. He couldn't use the peony brand as an excuse anymore, and he must be busy with work. But the biggest reason was likely that he wanted to draw a clear line between them. So there must have been something fairly serious to make him call Maomao into his presence.

There were no other palace ladies in the dining hall. Even the dormitory aunties had read the room and shown themselves out. Chue leaned in and whispered in Maomao's ear. "A cursed jar was discovered under the eaves of a certain official's house."

"Ooh. I haven't had a good mystery in a while."

She used to deal with that stuff all the time in the rear palace, but these days she didn't hear many stories like this.

"I know! And this official's daughter is in dire straits because of the curse."

Whatever it was, the story had made its way to Jinshi. That implied the official in question was highly placed.

"And you want me to break this curse?"

"Oh, yes! Exactly, Miss Maomao."

"Do you believe in curses?"

Chue, like Maomao, was not the superstitious type.

"Hoo hoo hoo! Let's call it a matter of the mind—or the heart. Curses may not exist for you, Miss Maomao, but sometimes things happen for

which other people have no other name.” She grinned. “Now, are you coming?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Ooh hoo hoo hoo!”

Clearly, she did not.

Chapter 8: The Cursed Jar

Maomao had assumed Chue would take her to Jinshi's palace, but instead their carriage arrived at a storehouse. Standing in the light of a watch fire was Jinshi, with Basen attending him. Basen's older sister Maamei was there too. Maomao recognized several of the guards, but as per usual, she didn't remember their names, so we'll omit them from our list.

Sorry to burst in so late...

Inside, the storehouse was surprisingly warm, with several lights and braziers burning.

Glad it's so cozy, but I see a problem here.

She was worried about ventilation. She'd once nearly died because of incompletely combusted charcoal. Maomao discreetly made sure that the windows and doors were cracked.

"Sorry to drag you out here." Jinshi sat in a simple chair and was looking at a table on which sat a most mysterious jar. There was a thick carpet at his feet. It was like a slice of another world right there in the storehouse. The braziers that all but surrounded the table made clear that someone had tried to make the place as livable as possible. It was like there was a whole separate little room right there.

"Forgive me for sparing any preamble, but take a look at this."

It was the same sort of thing Jinshi had always said during their time in the rear palace, except that since he wasn't pretending to be a eunuch anymore, his voice was a little lower. His eyes looked a bit too wide, too—maybe it was a trick of the light.

"Now, isn't this a filthy thing?" Maomao said.

"Don't say that *while* you try to pick it up with your bare hands!" He batted her hand away. The familiarity of the exchange was oddly comforting.

"If I don't touch it, how will I know what's in it?"

"You *delegate*."

The jar was small enough to hold easily in two hands. It was also sealed

firmly shut, with a slew of ceremonial wards plastered all over the lid. The wards were inscribed with magical incantations—they made the thing look like the quintessential cursed jar.

Suiren would never have stood for a hexed object entering Jinshi's palace. That must be why they were here instead.

"Master Jinshi, did Lady Suiren stand quietly by and let you occupy the same space as a cursed jar?"

"She did not."

"I'm surprised you were able to bring her around."

"I said that sometimes I need a change of pace. I was told in no uncertain terms not to touch the jar—and not to catch a cold, hence the...thorough precautions."

Yes, that would explain the braziers, and the carpet, and the luxurious fur warmer around Jinshi's shoulders. Suiren's overprotective streak was on full display.

A change of pace, huh?

Maomao didn't doubt that it was exhausting to do desk work all day, every day. Knowing that she couldn't let it get too late, she got down to business. "I take it you haven't examined the contents of the jar yet?"

"No, as you can see. There seems to be some sort of liquid inside, although I doubt it's a cursing brew," Jinshi said, referring to a particular kind of magic: Insects would be placed in a jar and allowed to fight to the death until only one remained, with the survivor turned into a liquid believed to impart curses.

"Being left in there long enough to liquefy certainly wouldn't be pleasant," Maomao agreed. She'd once left a snake she had been raising for rather too long. Long enough that it had been desiccated when she found it—but imagining the process it must have gone through to get there made one's skin crawl. "Do you suppose it could be blood or something?"

"You think of the most awful things, Miss Maomao!" Chue said with a melodramatic show of fear.

Oh, don't act so shocked.

Maomao ignored her and continued to study the jar. "I'm told this was found at an official's house?"

"That's right."

"And then it was brought to you?"

“Yes.”

Maomao heaved a sigh. “May I assume this official was someone of quite high rank?”

“Mm. Frankly, you can probably guess the only people who could make such an odd request of me.”

In his eunuch days, it might have been one thing—but who could bring a cursed jar to the Imperial younger brother? Such a person would have to be audacious indeed; most would consider it an act of impertinence.

I can certainly think of one *person who wouldn’t think twice about it.*

The freak strategist came immediately to mind. Still, this kind of thing was out of his usual wheelhouse when it came to tormenting Jinshi. Besides, his family didn’t have any daughters who might be in “dire straits” because of a curse.

Who does that leave?

Time for some process of elimination. Maomao could think of one other highly ranked official who fit the bill.

“Would it be someone associated with the Empress Dowager’s family?”

Maomao wasn’t actually sure whether she should ask, but it was too late now. Instead of responding, Jinshi heaved an even bigger sigh than Maomao had.

Basen, however, was more transparent. “How did you know?!” he burst out. It was time for him to learn to keep a straight face.

“And this official’s daughter?”

“The daughter of the clan patriarch. That would make her the Empress Dowager’s niece.”

Or in other words, the Emperor’s cousin.

“Where was the poison discovered?” Maomao asked. She wanted to know every detail of the situation.

“It was buried under the eaves of the house right near the daughter’s room. Her pet cat found it, or so I’m told.”

“A very clever cat.”

“Just like mine.”

Maomao chose to ignore that. Instead she took a cloth from the folds of her robe and wrapped it around her right hand.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Jinshi asked.

“You told me to investigate. I can’t just sit here. I can touch it with my

hand wrapped, can't I?"

"But..." Jinshi seemed to want to object. Chue only looked on with interest.

"There is a clear hierarchy of who does what at moments like this," Maamei said, holding some handkerchiefs out to Basen. "And we have my little brother here!" She looked very...into this.

Jinshi didn't say anything.

Maomao didn't say anything.

But they were probably having the same thought.

This does not *bode well.*

Maamei probably wanted to show off her brother at work. This was about the potential betrothal to Lishu, Maomao intuited, but she felt Maamei would be better off finding a different way to approach the situation.

"I can do it," Basen said, wrapping the handkerchiefs around his hand and hefting the jar. "I'm made of tougher stuff than to be subdued by some curse. Besides, opening the lid of a jar is child's play for me!"

"Yes, I know, but..." Jinshi looked deeply uneasy, and Maomao was right there with him. The moment gave her a distinct sense that there was a flag fluttering in the wind. She knew from experience what it felt like when *something* was about to happen, and she was feeling it now.

"You needn't put yourself out, Master Basen. I can do it," she said finally. She was just too worried. She made to snatch the jar from him, but came up empty.

"Please, Maomao. This is obviously a job for my brother, so just—"

Maamei didn't get to finish her sentence. She was interrupted by a sharp *pling!*

All eyes went to Basen, who was now holding a broken jar. Basen had always been baby-faced—and now the way he squinched his eyes shut, he looked like a child who knew he was in for a serious scolding.

"Even with the handkerchiefs, I still..." he said.

"My stupid little brother!" Maamei instantly went from nervous tension to the fury of a demon, slamming her fist into Basen's forehead. Chue laughed so hard she clutched her sides.

"Why would we give Master Basen something *delicate*?" Maomao asked.

“I know! I know...” Jinshi clutched his head. Maamei continued to mete out punishment to her brother. The other guards looked to Jinshi for guidance, wondering if they should stop her, but he showed no sign of intervening. It was a good thing this was happening in a storehouse. If they’d been at Jinshi’s palace, Basen would have been enduring one of Suiren’s famous tongue-lashings in addition to his sister’s beating.

Maomao went over to take a good look at the broken jar and the liquid now seeping out of it.

“Perhaps Miss Chue can shed some light on the situation? Hoo hoo!” Chue said, trotting over with a lamp. She was still grinning in what Maomao took to be amusement at Basen’s screwup.

“Thank you, that helps,” said Maomao.

The liquid in the jar was something black. It had a distinctive odor, but it wasn’t blood. Maomao considered.

“Hey!” Jinshi exclaimed as she plunged a finger into it. He grabbed her wrist. “What if it curses you?!”

“It won’t do that. But this is more dangerous than any curse.”

Tugging gently to tell Jinshi to let go of her, Maomao sniffed the liquid on her finger. It smelled like tea.

“If it’s not a curse, what is it?”

“I’d say it’s poison.”

Maomao had been half right. Shock showed plainly on Jinshi’s face. “Poison?”

“Yes, just like I thought. More accurately, it’s something in the process of *becoming* poisonous.”

The identity of the liquid was richly steeped tea.

Jinshi gave the stuff a look of mild annoyance. This particular poison was hardly anything remarkable by palace standards, but actually finding it —and thus having to deal with it—was certainly not welcome news.

For as Maomao said, poison was far more potentially harmful to its target than a simple curse.

“If you put strong tea in a bamboo flask and bury it in the ground for a month or so, it turns into poison. A high-quality tea, something well dried and not fermented, is ideal. This person didn’t use a bamboo flask, obviously, but it looks like the same method. I’d love to try bamboo versus jar, and see if they turn into the same kind of poison, but my book didn’t

describe how to do it with a jar."

"There's no need to 'see' that! Why do you even have a book like that?!" Jinshi stared daggers at her, but it was simple: She'd found it at the bookstore and bought it. Personal interest.

"I thought if you left tea sitting around for a month, it would just go bad and give you an upset stomach," Basen offered. He was in a formal seated position, feet tucked under his behind, as a way of encouraging him to think about his mistakes. The marks of Maamei's fists and slippers were evident all over him.

"Oh, it definitely turned into poison!"

"Why are you using the past tense?!" Jinshi demanded, stalking up to Maomao.

"Ha ha ha!" She tried to laugh it off, but Jinshi wouldn't stop glowering at her. There was more: She'd made the tea with the Verdigris House's best leaves, giving the madam a fit; moreover, testing her creation had gradually sapped her of her strength until Luomen had frantically intervened with an antidote. The book she had referenced for her experiment had been burned.

"Anyway, we need to focus on solving the case," she said, forcibly bringing them back to the subject. She took another close look at the shattered jar and its contents. "It doesn't seem to have fully matured yet. The wards bearing curses must have been for one of two things: Either the person thought creating the poison was somehow a magical process, or they wanted it to *look* like they were placing a curse instead of producing poison."

In Maomao's estimation, this did not seem like the work of a master of either medicine or poison. If they had known what they were doing, they would have used a bamboo flask, not some jar, and they would have known that strips of paper with spells written on them would be of no use. There was, however, the possibility that they believed that the tea would turn into poison by placing a curse on it.

Jinshi gave a thoughtful *hmmm*.

"Something catch your attention, sir?"

"How precisely would this poison be used, and what would be the effect?" Jinshi asked. He knew more about poison than the average citizen. He knew different kinds had different smells and tastes, and that there were both quick- and slow-acting varieties that each had their own applications.

“You would give the target a few drops a day, and it would gradually weaken their stomach. I suspect they would die after several months.”

Maomao herself had suffered from vomiting and stomachaches. An already weakened target might well succumb after just a couple of months. Highly steeped tea had a distinct astringency, but that could be concealed readily enough by putting it in food.

“I heard the daughter of the household in question was in dire straits,” Maomao said. “You suppose she’s weakening and dying because she’s been poisoned?”

“Is that what you thought I meant, Maomao?”

“Well, yes. Wait... I assumed the ‘dire straits’ were that she was dying from a curse. Am I wrong about that?” Maomao grunted. True, the expression could be taken any number of ways.

Jinshi gave Maamei a questioning look. “Has the young lady normally been healthy?”

“No. She’s always been prone to illness, her stomach frail and her appetite meager. But given that those are exactly the symptoms Maomao described, it’s possible that someone has been slipping her poison for years.”

“If it *was* poison at work, there’s still something that doesn’t add up,” Maomao said, crossing her arms.

“What’s that?”

Maomao looked at the size of the jar, then at the amount of liquid seeping out of it. “If someone had been giving her this poison, then frankly she should have died long ago. Just suppose they were running low on their supply, so they started making more in this jar to be sure they wouldn’t run out. She must’ve drunk *scads* of the stuff in all this time.”

Maomao picked up one of the broken shards. “At a rate of two drops a day, how long do you think a jar of this size would last?”

The vessel was big enough to fill her two hands. Plenty of stuff in there for a couple of drops a day.

“Easily six months at least, I’d say,” Jinshi replied.

“Like I said, more than enough to kill somebody. Considering the stomach pains that stuff caused me, someone with a frail constitution probably wouldn’t last two months.”

Jinshi glowered at her as if to say, *I knew you had tried it!*

“Ahem!” Maomao coughed to distract him. “There’s always the possibility that it was diluted with a weaker poison as well. Would it be possible for me to investigate whether the young lady in question is being given poison even now?”

“Believe me, I would love to have you do that, but...”

“Is there a problem?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t notice. The problem is which family we’re talking about.”

Maomao nodded: Ah, yes.

It was the Empress Dowager’s clan, that’s what he’d said. Maomao didn’t know much about them, but this was the family that had made their way in the world by offering their *very* young daughter to the former emperor. She didn’t know who ran the place now, but from the way Jinshi was acting, it seemed like it might be smart not to get involved.

“Aren’t you the one who sent me to the Crystal Pavilion in order to solve a problem at the rear palace?”

“Notwithstanding her ladies,” Jinshi said uneasily, “Consort Lihua at least was an outstanding person.”

In other words, the same could not be said for the head of the Empress Dowager’s family.

Fair enough. I’m not sure about the whole asking the Emperor’s brother to investigate a cursed jar thing, even if they are family.

This was not like asking the “eunuch” Jinshi to do something in the rear palace.

“Come to think of it, did the Empress Dowager’s family send another young lady who’s a current consort at the rear palace?” Maomao asked.

“They did. And she’s not unrelated to this situation.”

“Let me guess. They brought the matter to you because they thought someone in the family was trying to curse this consort.”

“So they did.”

So that’s the story.

A daughter in dire straits: meaning, not one who was suffering from a curse, but one who was suspected of cursing an Imperial consort. A “curse” might or might not have any practical effect, but people would expect her to be punished for it.

Who was it they sent to the rear palace, again?

Maomao pressed a finger to her temple, thinking. She seemed to remember that it was...not the Empress Dowager's granddaughter, but the granddaughter of her half-sister.

Maamei helpfully jogged her memory: "The girl who entered the rear palace was the patriarch's grandniece, which also makes her the grandniece of the Empress Dowager. And rumors are going around at the moment that she might be with child." Maamei was still jabbing Basen with her fingernails even as she spoke.

The Empress Dowager's family had tried hard to have Jinshi reinstated as the heir apparent. No doubt they were all in a tizzy to know that their grandniece might be pregnant. They would certainly want to avoid any stroke of misfortune—like a curse.

"*Why* would they drag you into such a dangerous mess?" Maomao asked before she could stop herself.

"Hey!" Basen shouted, but Maamei gave him a whack on the head to shut him up.

If two members of the family are trying to curse each other, the best thing would be to keep it in the family. Jinshi might technically be a relative, but Maomao couldn't understand why these people would get him involved.

There was something going on here that she still didn't know about.

"I can understand you taking this on in the rear palace, Master Jinshi, but in your current position, couldn't you just tell them no?"

"The request actually came from the Empress Dowager herself."

"She asked you personally?"

Whatever her family may have been like, they were still, well, her family. Even if they had sold her into the rear palace.

"She wanted my advice...on whether the patriarch's frail daughter had really put a curse on someone."

"What made them think she had?" It would be a lot easier to buy if she'd been accused of cursing someone *else's* family.

"The cursed jar was supposedly found by her room. It's worth noting that it should have been the patriarch's own daughter who went into the rear palace, but his grandniece went instead."

"She was too weak to enter the rear palace, so she supposedly cursed the woman who went in her place out of sheer resentment?"

"Mm. At least, that's what those around her seem to believe."

“Do people really take that attitude with the patriarch’s daughter?”

“She is the daughter of the clan head—but not of his legal wife. She’s a concubine’s child.”

Ahhh. Now it was beginning to make sense. People would treat a girl like that very differently.

“Ever since the man’s wife found the jar, she’s been trying to chase the girl and her mother out of the house, or so they say.”

When the Empress Dowager learned of her niece’s situation, however, she immediately understood that the girl must be in an unhappy position—and presumably her compassion went to work.

“The Empress Dowager, my mother, was herself the daughter of a concubine. I’m sure she was moved by the plight of a concubine and her child.”

The Empress Dowager was famous for her empathy. She was the woman who had freed the palace slaves and outlawed the surgery that produced eunuchs.

“Am I to understand, then, that the real issue is neither a curse nor poison—but the desire to clear a young woman’s name of using a curse and to help the helpless concubine’s daughter?” Maomao said.

“Your swift comprehension is a profound aid.”

Think nothing of it. Her comprehension had been tested often enough. She was used to this by now.

“Well, curse, poison, or whatever, it sounds like danger.”

Did the Empress Dowager really just want them to prove a young woman’s innocence? Or was she hoping Jinshi would look after the lady when she had been driven out of her home?

Maomao pondered, trying to plumb the Empress Dowager’s thoughts. Finally, she said, “Master Jinshi?”

“Yes?”

“Are we sure this won’t end with the daughter, er, *in your care* if we play our cards the wrong way?”

“Heh! Of course it won’t,” Jinshi said, but he stiffened visibly.

In your care: in other words, welcome the girl as his own concubine. That would be the normal implication.

Maamei and Basen looked on curiously. The expression on Jinshi’s face made them wonder what he and Maomao could possibly be talking about.

Chue had long ago grown bored and was warming a grilled rice cake over a brazier.

On impulse, Maomao nudged Jinshi and whispered in his ear. “Master Jinshi... You haven’t told the Empress Dowager about the brand on your side, have you?”

“How in the world could I?” he hissed back. “What am I supposed to say? ‘Oh, by the way, I scorched a brand into my own flesh?’”

“Well, then why did you do it in the first—”

Jinshi slapped a hand over Maomao’s mouth. She had come dangerously close to yelling.

“My mother may have been a strict disciplinarian, but she wouldn’t force me to do something I didn’t want to,” he said.

“But we can’t speak for her family.”

“Yes,” Jinshi said slowly. “I wouldn’t put it past my uncle Sir Hao.”

This patriarch, Hao, sounded like something of a villain.

Actually, that reminds me, he’s sure caused us his share of trouble.

The proxy war between the families of the Empress Dowager and the Empress had kept the medical staff very busy. True, in the end it had turned out to be only a small group of hotheaded youngsters causing all the trouble, but the fact remained that Hao had not intervened to stop them.

As for Jinshi, as the Imperial younger brother, he couldn’t afford to take in a consort. That meant proving the girl’s innocence was their only option, but there were plenty of hurdles. Since they had determined that this was not a curse but poison at work, it was possible that poisoning explained the girl’s continual frailty. If they couldn’t find out who was poisoning her, however, she would continue to waste away until she died.

And one thing’s for sure: Whichever it is, her life is in danger.

“What do you want to do, Master Jinshi?”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it? My mother is a compassionate person. She doesn’t really care about what this jar is; she wants to rescue that young lady.”

Easy for her to say!

Maomao folded her arms and groaned. Jinshi was quite a soft touch himself, even if he wasn’t as bad as the Empress Dowager. Really not the stuff of a politician.

“It comes down to this: We have to see what’s happening on the ground or we just won’t know.”

“That’s what I thought.” Jinshi didn’t sound enthused. But he would do it.

Maamei and Basen didn’t look any happier than he did. Only Chue was her usual merry self.

Chapter 9: The Patriarch’s Daughter (Part One)

On this occasion, Jinshi would be accompanying them to the Empress Dowager’s family home. As such, it was just him and Maomao in the carriage. Maamei and Chue rode in another vehicle, while Basen followed on horseback. Needless to say, the arrangement was Chue’s idea.

“Let me give you some background on the Empress Dowager’s family. Just for your reference,” Jinshi said.

“Yes, sir.”

He proceeded to explain the situation to her. She’d heard parts of it before; the repetition might have been in deference to the ever-forgetful Maomao. Sadly for Chue, Maomao and Jinshi both had their “work brains” on, and none of the *developments* she might have hoped for came to pass.

“The Empress Dowager has a complicated relationship with her family,” Jinshi said.

She was the daughter of a concubine of the former patriarch of the clan; the current clan head was her half-brother, a man named Hao.

Originally they had been a merchant family dealing in all kinds of dyes, and about a century before, they had received a commission to serve the Imperial Palace. That connection meant that some of the men of the clan became civil servants. The massicot gold color allowed only to the Emperor was produced by the Empress Dowager’s clan as well.

One could have called them upstarts, and perhaps they were, but as time went on their act of social climbing became merely a facet of history. By the reign of the former emperor, they were firmly entrenched as a trusted household by the throne.

Their work with clothing naturally led them to take on projects for the rear palace. Presumably this same information network was what had allowed them to send Anshi—the future mother of the current Emperor—into the rear palace herself. To all appearances, the family had built itself

quite a secure position by that point.

“The empress regnant, however, was wary of the previous patriarch, and although the clan was given jobs that befitted distant relations of the Imperial family, they were never awarded a courtesy name.”

“I see.”

In other words, they were not one of the named clans. No wonder they were so incensed that the Empress’s family had been gifted the courtesy name *Gyoku*.

“Hao is not on excellent terms with the Empress Dowager. In fact, she rarely even exchanges letters with him directly, but corresponds with his wife instead.”

With his wife? Maomao cocked her head, but let it go.

There was a reason the Empress Dowager’s clan couldn’t wield their influence as freely as she might have thought.

But they still have enough power to cause chaos in the palace.

Maybe that was actually healthier than having the balance of power in the royal realm tilt too far in the direction of the Gyoku clan.

“If there’s so much bad blood between them, could the Empress Dowager have chosen simply not to intervene?”

“Don’t say that. Even had she pretended not to notice the situation, the price would have been paid by the concubine and her daughter—a bit too close to home for the Empress Dowager’s tastes, I presume.”

It wasn’t that Maomao didn’t understand how she felt. It was just that sometimes you had to cut your losses in order to avoid causing even bigger problems. It might sound cold, but Maomao had no interest in causing ten new furors to solve one old trouble.

“I know you want me to help, but there are limits to what I can do,” she said.

He was asking a lot of her.

One: Prove that Hao’s daughter had not cast a curse.

Two: If the girl was indeed suffering from poison, discover who was doing it to her.

Three: Do all of this in such a way that the girl herself would be safe.

Four: But the girl could not end up as Jinshi’s royal concubine.

There’s difficult, and then there’s way *too difficult.*

Furthermore, even if she did catch somebody poisoning the young lady,

it wouldn’t do for them to be punished, lest the case should become public knowledge.

“There are limits,” she reiterated without quite meaning to.

“I can only ask you to do your best,” Jinshi replied. His proclivity to push himself far past his limits was alive and well, she thought. Maybe he really did feel bad about this one, though, because he fiddled with something near at hand.

“Do you want this?” he asked finally.

“What is it?”

He held out a wooden box. Inside was a desiccated specimen of some creature with a tightly curled tail.

“Seahorse!” Maomao exclaimed.

Seahorses were sometimes said to be the bastard children of dragons—they lived in the ocean, but they looked less like fish than like legless lizards.

Maomao reached out, eyes sparkling, but Jinshi swiped the box away.

“Will you work hard?”

“I’ll work *so* hard!” Maomao said, smacking herself on the chest. “Which reminds me, shall I take our usual tack and pose as your maid today?”

Jinshi glanced away. “I’ve told them only that we have someone well-versed in cursing brews. But truth be told, I don’t think we can cover for you for very long. I think there’s an unspoken but very real understanding among the medical staff of who you actually are.”

Maomao remained studiously silent. What was Jinshi saying?

“Much as I know you hate the idea, quite frankly, it would make a lot of things vastly easier if you were to openly use the honored strategist’s name.”

“I know that, thank you.”

Oh, how she knew it. What he was saying was: Maomao was going to do this as the freak strategist’s daughter.

I should have known there was some reason he had a seahorse ready to go!

She gazed out the window, mulling over what a huge pain this all was.

Hao’s mansion turned out to be close enough that it hadn’t really required a carriage. More troublingly, it was not far at all from the home of

the freak strategist.

That was perhaps inevitable: The capital was a big place, but the areas where people lived were more constrained. The mansions for high officials were all built in the same general vicinity, and there was always the issue of available land, such that houses built later often found themselves confined to a smaller scale than their predecessors.

Hao's mansion was emphatically *not* one of the cramped ones. It was, however, rather ordinary looking for an estate that belonged to the family of the Empress Dowager.

The gate bore a crest depicting safflower and gardenia. Both were common ingredients in medicine—but also in dyes. It might have been meant to imply that the massicot gold, a reddish-tinged gold color, was made by combining the red safflowers with the golden gardenias.

At the gate was a substantial reception line—this *was* the Emperor's younger brother who was visiting, whatever circumstances might have brought him.

He warned me it would be mostly the men.

Jinshi had told her that other than the young woman at the heart of the case, Hao's family was all sons. Hence why it was his grandniece who had entered the rear palace.

Maomao didn't spot any young ladies among the assembled greeters. There were one or two women, but their dress showed that they were servants. We'll leave off a description of the looks they gave Jinshi.

Among the crowd she saw a wispy woman who looked to be in her fifties. Her face was pale except for her nose, which was bright red, as if she had put red makeup on it. She was wearing nicer clothing than anyone else there, so Maomao took her to be Hao's wife.

There was also an attractive woman somewhere in her thirties. She stood demurely in the back, but had the next nicest clothes after the wife. She seemed too refined to be a servant.

She's the concubine, then?

She exuded a gossamer but unmistakable eroticism.

"Pardon me for coming so late at night," Jinshi said. He spoke to a man of forty—no, maybe fifty or so. His outfit and bearing both marked him as the most important person there, so Maomao understood that he must be the patriarch, Hao. Nonetheless, he lacked something in authority. Maybe it

was the youthful quality of his face—maybe growing a beard would make him look a little older. Then again, he didn't appear to have much body hair at all, so maybe growing a beard was beyond him.

To think, that's where the family resemblance lies. The Empress Dowager, too, had a baby face.

"No, sir, it's you who must pardon me. By rights we should have resolved this concern on our own, without troubling your honored self with the matter. But Anshi, you know, she's always been the worrying type!"

Hao acted like he was good friends with the Empress Dowager. No doubt he wanted to put the best spin he could on the situation, but the truth was already out: The two of them did not get along.

"In any case, please, please, come inside. It's so cold these days. Let us make you some nice, warm food."

"I had dinner before I came. I'm more interested in dealing with this as quickly as possible."

A scowl passed over Hao's face. For better or worse, Maomao realized, he was an easy man to read. The prior patriarch must have been clever, she thought, to send the Empress Dowager to the rear palace. But his son showed no such razor sharpness. Or else he wouldn't have looked so...*casual* at a visit from the Emperor's younger brother.

His parents didn't raise this boy right, Maomao thought. A proverb had it that the wealth accumulated in a single generation could be squandered in three, and Hao looked like a case in point. The situation might remind her of the Gyoku clan, whom she'd so recently had the opportunity to study in great detail, but they at least had a clutch of excellent sons and daughters.

Hao cast Maomao a disapproving look, but that was all. As Jinshi had said, the freak strategist proved a fine way of keeping people at bay.

"I'll show you the way, then," he said. "But as there's a sick person in the building, perhaps you could wait with us, Moon Prince."

"You bring me a cursed jar, and *now* you worry about exposing me to illness?" Jinshi said. Right on the money, Maomao thought.

"Anshi did that."

Right. Sure.

Maomao realized this man Hao did have a strength after all. Baby-faced he might be, but he was very composed, and brazen to boot. She could practically see him some time in the future, bragging that the Emperor's

brother had come to his very house, while omitting any mention of the curse.

And the Empress Dowager isn't someone to be trifled with either.

She hadn't needed to send Jinshi personally, in Maomao's opinion. But if it hadn't been Jinshi, the Emperor's own younger brother, she might not have been able to make such a strong move against her brother, even if they were related by blood. Probably a big headache for Anshi.

"See that you show the proper respect as you take them," Hao was saying to another man. Evidently, he was unwilling to approach a place that was said to be cursed, and left it in the hands of this other guide instead.

Their new escort was a man in his mid-twenties who looked like a younger version of Hao. Then again, given that youthful appearances seem to run in the family, maybe he was a little older than he seemed.

"I'm called Lai," he said. "I'll take you on my father's behalf."

The young man seemed to have a sense of his place relative to Jinshi; at any rate, he didn't act too keen to promote himself.

I'll never remember that name, thought Maomao.

"Try to remember his name, at *least* while you're here," Chue whisper-drawled in her ear. Busted.

As was her usual habit, Maomao observed the estate as they walked through. She couldn't see much in the moonlight, but suddenly an odor prickled her nose.

Smells like farm fields.

She sniffed, turning in the direction of the smell, and saw an impressive cattle barn.

"Now, what's all *that*?" Chue asked, voicing Maomao's question for her.

"That's our cattle shed. Our family was bestowed the oxen the former emperor once used to move about the rear palace. We have the grandchildren of those animals now."

The present Emperor didn't use ox-drawn carriages; they were too slow for his needs. Maomao avoided saying out loud that he had found an awfully clever way to off-load them.

Lai didn't talk too much after that. Normally one might have expected him to brag about the family's gardens or mention some bit of clan history. Maybe it was just the darkness that kept him from sharing—they couldn't really see much, after all—but in any case, he was very quiet. Chue was

practically vibrating with her desire to chitchat, until Maamei gave her a pointed nudge.

The father was pretty full of himself, yet the son only spoke when spoken to. The young man looked like his father—but maybe he got his personality from his mother?

In any case, Jinshi didn't seem to mind the silence, so they all respected it.

A silence-is-golden guy, huh?

Humility was a virtue, but if this guy was going to be Hao's successor, Maomao worried that he'd get eaten alive. Or maybe he had some other, more ambitious brother or brothers.

Not so easy to find a middle way...

While Maomao was imagining the ways a house could collapse in the span of three generations, they arrived at their destination.

"Here it is," Lai said. "I'm terribly sorry it's so hard to see here, but please accept my apologies."

He pointed to where the by-now notorious jar had been found and held up a light so that it was at least a little easier to see. In a gloomy patch in a corner of the north side a hole about thirty centimeters large seemed to have been dug; the earth there was a different color. It was surrounded by a square outline, as if something had once sat on top of it.

"That's where we found it."

Maomao looked at Jinshi. He gave a wave of his hand; she was at liberty to speak as she wished.

She lost no time beginning her interrogation of Lai. "It was buried there?"

"Yes. The jar was buried in the ground, and that shelf over there had been put over it."

The shelf had been moved a short distance away. It was designed for outdoor use, and was currently stocked with gardening implements. It had definitely made the outline Maomao saw in the ground.

Maybe I can borrow something off that shelf to do some digging.

The place really was kind of grim, under the eaves of a separate building from the main house. It didn't look like people came here much. If anyone at all frequented the place, it was probably just the gardener, coming to get his tools.

“How did you happen to find it?” Maomao asked. She’d heard the story already, but was curious if there would be any discrepancies.

“By chance. We spotted the cat covered in mud and wondered what it was doing—it turned out it was digging under that shelf.”

“A cat?”

“Yes, ma’am. It once belonged to my cousin’s daughter, but our family took it in when she went to the rear palace.”

Anyone could have buried that jar, so long as they were careful to avoid the gardener.

“I’ve heard your youngest sister lives in this building. Would it be possible to meet her?” Maomao asked.

Lai paused, then said, “She’s quite ill, and much younger than me—still only fourteen. She’s a very collected young lady, but she has scant appetite and very rarely goes outside.”

“May I observe her condition just once?” Maomao pressed.

Lai’s eyes flitted to Jinshi. “She came all the way here,” Jinshi said. “Have her take a look. She’s an assistant to the palace medical officers. I guarantee she’s a better pair of hands than a random doctor off the street.”

“Certainly, sir.” Lai was in no position to refuse a “suggestion” from an Imperial family member. Not that it looked like he really wanted to.

He doesn’t act like someone who’s poisoning the girl, Maomao thought, observing Lai’s movements.

“It wouldn’t be proper for a man to enter a young lady’s chamber. I’ll wait outside,” Jinshi said, stopping by the door. A cultured, considerate attitude for a man to have. And perfect cover for preventing the trouble that would arise if the girl saw him and got any funny ideas.

And, of course, another expression of his determination *not* to bring the young lady home as his royal concubine.

“If you would wait in the next room then, sir,” Lai said. Jinshi was joined by Basen and Maamei, while Chue went with Maomao.

“I’m coming in,” Lai announced brusquely, and then opened the door.

“Master Lai? Whatever is the matter?”

The question came from the beautiful thirtyish woman who had been among the reception party. She held a small teapot in her hand; she must have been making tea.

I knew she must be the concubine, Maomao thought, observing her from

behind Lai.

Next she looked to the bed, where there lay a girl, still young enough to appear childishly innocent. Her color was bad, however, and although Lai had said she was fourteen, her body didn't show it.

Mother and daughter looked much like each other. Maomao could see why Hao would have liked to send the girl to the rear palace, if only she hadn't been ill.

The room was dark. No wonder, given the hour, but the moonlight that filtered in made the girl look like just a pale, floating face.

Maybe the dearth of visual information was what made Maomao's sense of smell kick into overdrive. She detected the scent of honey from the candle, and the smell of the herbs in the teapot. Probably something to help the girl sleep.

Maomao also noticed that something about the lovely concubine felt oddly...familiar.

The woman set down the teapot with long, slim fingers; she carried herself like a swaying willow. She conscientiously held her head at an angle that would show her best side to the visitors at all times.

Maomao knew, for she had spent her entire life around such women.

She comes from the pleasure district.

Her outfit was plainer now, but the way she wore it and the very aura she exuded—those things couldn't be changed. In the dim room, too, she had an eroticism that reminded Maomao of a courtesan in the bedchamber. But there was no need to make any smart remarks about the matter, so she stayed quiet.

"A companion of the Moon Prince is here to look at Zhizi," Lai said.

Zhizi!

What a fantastic name. It referred to the gardenia, which had applications as both a medicine and a dye. If Hao had named the girl after the family crest and business, it meant he expected great things of her and had presumably raised her accordingly.

Maybe we can get something as a souvenir! It was not a very respectful hope, but Maomao cherished it nonetheless. If the family still traded in dyes, then they must have safflower and gardenia on hand. Either would be great...or both!

"You mean this woman?" the concubine asked, eyeing Maomao.

“This is an apothecary who comes with the Imperial younger brother’s highest recommendation!” Chue chirped. “Don’t tell me you don’t *approve*!” A threat entered her voice but the grin never left her face.

“Perish the thought. But no doctor yet has been able to cure my daughter’s illness...” The concubine held the girl close and let out a moan. With listless eyes, the child clutched her mother’s arm.

“All the same, please let me examine her. It won’t do any harm to take a look.”

“Of course...” The concubine looked at Maomao, still worried.

She wouldn’t give me that look if I were a proper physician.

It occurred to her that maybe next time she should try a stick-on beard. But then, beard or no beard, a quack was a quack. (Somewhere, the physician of the rear palace sneezed.)

“Pardon me, then.” Maomao took Zhizi’s hand. The girl was too weak to do anything but let her.

She looks like someone who’s given up.

She certainly didn’t look fourteen years old. Maomao took her pulse, then checked her eyes and tongue. When she looked in Zhizi’s mouth, she caught a faint whiff of milk.

“Excuse me, but could I have a cup of tea?” Maomao asked, pointing at the teapot that smelled of herbs.

“I’ll make some fresh,” the concubine said, going to trade out what was in the pot.

“Oh, no, just steep what’s there. It smells lovely—a sedative, I’m sure.” Maomao sniffed again.

“I couldn’t possibly offer you tea from spent leaves. The water is already boiling. I’ll make new.”

The concubine did just that, loath to insult a visitor.

“Thank you very much,” Maomao said. She took a sip and assessed the flavor.

I thought so.

Then she drank the cup in a single gulp.

She turned to Lai. “I’ll make a medicine appropriate to the girl’s condition. May I return another day?”

“I would be overjoyed if you would do so, but, well...” He looked at the concubine and her daughter. He seemed to be asking: *Is the real matter not*

the cursed jar?

"I'd like to discuss that on my next visit," said Maomao, stirring the leaves at the bottom of her teacup as she spoke.

Chapter 10: The Patriarch’s Daughter (Part Two)

Maomao and the others decided to go home for the time being. There were too many things that would be difficult to discuss at Hao’s mansion, and they determined that their brainstorm should be held somewhere else.

The carriage home was more cramped than the one going out, for one simple reason: Maamei and Chue were now in it with them. There might have been room for one more, had they really squeezed, but it had been decided that Basen would not be much help in there, so he had been left out. Namely, of course, it had been decided by his sister Maamei.

It was already late at night, so the group determined to finish their exchange of information by the time they got back.

Jinshi crossed his arms and looked at Maomao. “All right, Maomao. It looks like you had an idea. Let the rest of us in on it?”

“As always, this is merely my supposition...”

“As always, I’m more than happy to hear your supposition.”

Maomao considered the matter for a moment, but there was really nothing to hide, so she spoke frankly. “Zhizi is indeed being poisoned, as we suspected. And it’s her mother, the concubine, who’s making it.”

“Wow! How unusual for you to get right to the point!” Chue said, bouncing up and down in time to the rocking of the carriage.

“The mother is poisoning her own daughter?” Maamei asked as if she couldn’t quite believe it. In a flash of realization Maomao saw that, whatever else may have happened in her life, Maamei had been raised with love.

“Yes,” she said.

“Just because someone is a mother doesn’t mean they’re *motherly*,” Chue drawled, helpfully spelling out what Maomao wanted to say.

I wonder if somebody cut off her *little finger.*

Okay, probably not, but then, Maomao didn’t know anything about

Chue's family. She never said, and Maomao, as was her habit, never asked.

"Are you *certain* the mother is the one poisoning her daughter?" Jinshi asked.

"I wouldn't say certain, sir, but I would say nearly certain." She knew Jinshi and Maamei would never really believe her unless she could produce concrete proof. "That tea I was served included a variety of medicinal herbs. Some of them were to help with sleep, and the flavor was decent—but I suspect Zhizi's cup included the notorious poison."

If Basen had been here, he probably would have been demanding to know how a parent could ever poison her child, but as he wasn't, the discussion could continue.

Jinshi merely crossed his arms, unruffled; he was used to this stuff by now. "Given your evident lack of excitement, I take it there was no poison in *your* cup."

"You're exactly right, Moon Prince. That concubine didn't use the leaves left over from when she made the girl's tea, she steeped fresh for Miss Maomao!"

"Yes, and even if I had imbibed some, I'd have to drink it every day to see any real effect. Of course, I would know it was there, anyway—poison does give a drink a special kick." Her little addendum. This poison, really, was about making someone decline slowly—naturally, as it were.

"Zhizi was showing the same symptoms I had when exposed to the poison," she added. She looked at Jinshi and Maamei, who were staring at her as if they didn't quite believe what they were hearing.

"Something nagging at you?" asked Chue. As the only one who had accompanied Maomao into the room, she was prepared to shore up any deficiencies in Maomao's testimony.

Jinshi looked somber. "Maomao...*remembered someone's name*. The first time!"

That's what's bothering him?!

Of course Maomao could remember someone's name on first hearing! Sometimes! Like Senior Wan-wan and old Dr. Lao. Cases in point!

"If you claim the mother poisoned her daughter, you'll need more proof than just that she wouldn't serve you from the same tea. *I* certainly wouldn't serve a guest with old leaves," Maamei said.

That was fair enough—Maomao agreed with her. If she or anyone had

tried to serve Jinshi with tea made from spent leaves, they would have caught hell from Suiren.

“She looked to me like a perfectly good mother who was concerned about her daughter. *Looked*, now,” said Chue, but there was a barb in her tone.

“The tea she steeped fresh for me had something bitter in it. As well as catmint.”

“Catmint?”

“Yes, sir. The name may refer to cats, and they do like it, but it has medicinal effects on humans as well.”

“Speaking of cats...”

“That’s right, sir.”

Back in the rear palace, they’d had a nasty little calico number also named Maomao, who’d often gone after the medical office’s supply of catnip.

“If someone who frequently handled catmint had touched the jar, the smell might have rubbed off on it—which would explain why a cat discovered it, or so I suspect. And I think the reason she put something bitter in the tea is to cover the bitterness of the poison.”

“But Zhizi’s mother has no reason to do her harm,” Maamei said. “If it were the wife poisoning her, that would make sense, but—”

“Ahem...” Maomao said.

“What is it?”

“Maamei, you seem to be taking this as Zhizi’s mother tormenting her personally.”

“Isn’t she? She and her mother are both on the verge of being thrown out of that house.”

I guess that’s the obvious way to look at it.

Maomao took the opportunity to bring together everything they knew about the girl and her mother. “We first learned of this when the Empress Dowager said that Zhizi was in dire straits and asked for help, yes?”

“Yes...”

“But the Empress Dowager’s only communication with Hao’s household is through his wife—his *legal* wife. The story went from the wife, to the Empress Dowager, and then to Master Jinshi. If the wife really wanted Zhizi and her mother out of the house, I don’t think she would have reached

out to the Empress Dowager."

The Empress Dowager was a woman of abounding compassion. What was more, Zhizi and the Empress Dowager were in similar situations. The wife would probably have understood that much, if they were close enough to exchange letters.

"Now that you mention it..."

Maamei was a very smart woman, but being born and raised in a privileged environment could produce certain blind spots. Maybe pairing her with Chue was the perfect thing.

"It would be natural for a sick person to live in a separate building, and besides, no one would believe that a wife and a concubine would get along. An annex would provide just the right distance to keep the peace in the household," Maamei remarked.

Maomao didn't say anything. The Ma clan had a lot of very powerful wives. It wasn't surprising that Maamei might naturally take a dim view of concubines.

Even if that's the polar opposite of the Imperial family's approach.

Guards who practiced self-denial were probably better in a whole variety of ways than guards who were too frisky.

"When it comes to Zhizi's half-brother, uh..."

"Mister Lai," Chue piped up.

"...to Lai, it didn't really look like he was picking on his half-sister or anything. Their building was meticulously maintained, and their clothing was perfectly good. As Maamei said, it's completely normal for someone to live separately when they have a disease that makes even doctors throw in the towel. I would do the same thing in their shoes for fear of infection. And the tea I was served contained an array of medicinal ingredients. It can't have been cheap. If you ask me, Zhizi is substantially more privileged than you would expect for someone in her position—she just also happens to be wasting away."

"There's no real reason for the wife or son to make her life harder, anyway, unless they're just jerks," said Chue. She and Maomao were both blasé about the idea that a well-placed man might have relations with more than one woman. If the child had been a young man similar in age to his siblings, a dispute over inheritance might have been understandable—but Zhizi was just the opposite. Tormenting someone who wasn't even really

your enemy was simply too petty.

“It’s the wife’s job to look after the family finances while Master Hao is away. If she really wanted to drive Zhizi out, she wouldn’t let her live in that kind of luxury,” Maomao added.

“Hmmm,” Maamei murmured.

“And if I may say so, this mother and daughter didn’t look especially close.”

“Ooh! You thought so too, Miss Maomao?”

“Wh-What do you mean? Were things really that bad between them?” Maamei asked.

“Oh, if you’d seen them, Miss Maamei, I think you would understand! That lady acted less like a *mother* and more like just a *woman*.”

Chue was exactly right. From a passing glance, especially by a man, she might have looked like a solicitous mother.

“The concubine was once a courtesan, wasn’t she?” Maomao asked Chue. Maamei had her information network, sure, but it would never be as good as Chue’s.

Chue grinned as if to say she’d checked all this out long ago.

“You think so?” Maamei asked.

“Yep! Guess you got a discerning eye growing up in the pleasure district, huh, Miss Maomao?”

“A courtesan still moves like a courtesan even after she retires.”

A first-rate courtesan transfixed her customers—her guests—with her very movements. She needed to understand what angle to tilt her head to be most attractive to them; every ripple of her hair and twitch of her fingers was calculated.

The concubine had been working *her* guests, Maomao and Chue, making sure that she looked as pitiful as possible. It had looked exactly like the courtesans at the Verdigris House who were the most ephemeral.

“She was trying to evoke sympathy, you mean?” Jinshi asked. He looked like he wasn’t quite getting it.

“That’s right,” Maomao said.

The concubine had been wearing the next-nicest clothes after Hao’s wife, and anyway, if she was really neglected, she presumably wouldn’t have been allowed to be present to greet the Imperial younger brother. Most of all, however, the poison in the jar was made from expensive tea leaves. If

she could obtain those, as well as herbal medicines, she could make as much poison as she wanted.

“I guess I let myself get carried away by my assumptions,” Maamei said self-reproachfully.

It’s easy to do, Maomao thought. People preferred stories that made sense to them. It might be one thing for a servant who was perpetually in the household, but a visitor could well imagine any number of things.

“If she just wants to make herself look pitiful, that’s her business, but I can’t approve of her using her daughter as a tool.”

“A tool?” Jinshi repeated. “You think she’s poisoning the girl merely to create sympathy for herself?!”

He was a quick study. That was exactly what Maomao had wanted to say.

“I think it makes the most sense of the information we have,” she told him.

“Surely not.” Jinshi gasped, looking like he didn’t want to believe her.

“I once knew a courtesan who deliberately went around with her hair disheveled, telling her clients that the senior courtesans were abusing her —‘Look how they treat me!’ she’d say. But it was all an act. Did you never encounter any consorts or ladies in the rear palace who behaved like that, Master Jinshi?”

After a long pause he replied, “Yes... Yes, I did.” He clearly had more than one person in mind.

“This is an extension of that sort of behavior. You weep to your customer that a kitten you’ve been caring for, or a little apprentice you especially dote on, has fallen ill with a mysterious ailment, and he feels such sympathy for you that he can never abandon you after that.”

Except in this case, the customer was Hao, the master of the house.

“But I just can’t see the benefit of weakening her own child with poison. Sir Hao doesn’t have any other daughters. Wouldn’t it be more beneficial to the concubine to send the girl to the rear palace and make her a consort?”

“Master Jinshi, could the daughter of a concubine, and a former courtesan at that, easily be elevated to the rank of a high consort?”

That left Jinshi at a loss. Having run the rear palace himself, he knew how many factors went into the selection of an upper consort. A woman needed family background as well as looks and intelligence; she had too

many competitors to be lacking any of those things.

"If you'll forgive my asking, when Empress Gyokuyou was elevated to high consort, were there many people who opposed the appointment?"

Empress Gyokuyou's mother had been married to the governor of the west, Gyokuen—who had several wives. Even now, there was no shortage of those who questioned whether someone with western blood in her veins was fit to be Empress.

"I don't know much about Master Hao," Maomao went on. "But might he be the kind of person who would act as if a former courtesan like Zhizi's mother didn't exist in the interest of making his daughter more likely to become an upper consort? If anyone is neglecting the woman in that annex, might it not be Master Hao himself?"

If Hao was seeking to have a daughter appointed as high consort, he would want Zhizi to be the offspring not of the concubine, but of his legal wife. It would be to his benefit if no one found out about the other woman. Let the girl learn the art of captivating a man from a former courtesan. If she seemed useful, he could simply have his legal wife adopt her. Maomao suspected the girl was already listed as the wife's daughter in the family register.

And what happens then?

Once Zhizi was safely in the rear palace, her real mother would have served her purpose.

But what if Zhizi was too sick to enter palace service? Maomao didn't know what kind of man Hao was, but even if he wasn't unusually compassionate, he was probably not so cruel as to simply abandon a blood daughter. She might never occupy the garlanded stage of public life, but still he wouldn't leave her on her own to starve.

"You could say the concubine was looking for a way to keep a husband from casting her aside. She gains the sympathy of those around her, plays the self-sacrificing mother, and perhaps revives a touch of self-respect by being compared to a legal wife who is neither young nor beautiful."

Jinshi and Maamei were both silent. Chue alone had a grin on her face, and a somewhat unsettling one at that.

Maybe she thought it was her only way to survive, Maomao reflected. To her, however, it seemed immensely selfish. *It's not a strong poison*, she thought—but it was still poison, and it still ate away at the girl's body.

“So tomorrow is going to be all about finding the proof to bear this story out?” Chue asked, sounding like someone who was very skilled at these sorts of backroom conversations.

“If that’s the goal, I’d like you to talk to the madam at the Verdigris House. And there’s one other thing I’d like to learn,” Maomao said.

“What might that be?” Chue chirped.

“Have a look at that cattle barn.”

“The cattle barn?” Chue wasn’t the only one who looked surprised; Jinshi and Maamei cocked their heads too.

Chapter 11: Gardenia and Safflower

The moment Maomao finished her shift at the medical office the next day, she headed to Hao's mansion. In the carriage on the way there, she reviewed what Chue's investigations had turned up.

I knew it!

It looked like the matter would be resolved smoothly, just as she'd guessed.

There was no sign of Hao, perhaps because Jinshi wasn't with them this time. Instead, his wife was there, and greeted them courteously. There were several servants, as well, but the concubine was conspicuous by her absence.

"We're told that you know who the culprit is behind the cursed jar," Hao's wife said.

"Yes, ma'am," said Maamei. (Chue was there, too, but it seemed wisest to have Maamei serve as the group's spokesperson.) "We'd like to give you an explanation in full. Perhaps we could go somewhere to talk?"

"Of course. Please, come this way," the wife said and led them to a reception area. It was a large room, but only she, one lady-in-waiting, and Maomao's party of three were there. A guard stood outside the door.

"What have you learned?" the woman asked, her reddish nose tilted toward the ground. She sounded like she knew the answer to her question but was asking anyway.

Maamei glanced at Maomao as if to say she would leave the rest to her.

"It wasn't a cursed jar, but a jar of poison," Maomao began. "The poison can be made with simple household ingredients, and when you found it, it was being kept underground to mature."

"Poison? Buried right under the eaves of our home?"

Maomao thought the woman sounded a bit theatrical, but as Hao's wife, it was really the only thing she could say.

"Yes, ma'am. As you may already realize, the one who made it was Master Hao's concubine—and the one she was using it on was her daughter,

Zhizi.”

The wife kept her eyes on the ground, silent. She didn’t look like someone processing a profound shock.

“You knew, didn’t you?”

After a long pause, the wife answered, “Yes.” The only surprising thing was how readily she admitted it.

It was this woman, not Hao himself, who corresponded with the Empress Dowager. What had she hoped to achieve by so pointedly bringing the “cursed” jar to the Empress Dowager’s attention? And why had the Empress Dowager, equally pointedly, sent Jinshi to deal with the matter?

“Was Zhizi given her name because the gardenia is part of the family business?” Maomao asked.

“That’s right. And because of that, I find myself called Suetsumuhana.”

“Suetsumuhana...”

That was another word for safflower. The woman stroked her red-tinted nose. It was enough to suggest what had earned her the nickname.

“They call *you* that? Not Zhizi’s mother?” Maomao said sourly.

Balsam and wood sorrel, she thought, recalling a name she had been saddled with.

“Were you mistaken for mother and daughter even though you aren’t related by blood?”

Wait, maybe not...

Maomao had let the idea out of her mouth before she could stop herself. She worried that she might have offended the other woman, but Suetsumuhana, oddly enough, gave her a blank look. “Wh-Whatever do you mean?” She showed just a hint of anxiety, and it actually made her red nose rather charming.

“Good question... What *do* I mean?” Maomao wasn’t quite sure herself. “I guess I mean that you couldn’t bring yourself to abandon Zhizi even though she’s not your blood daughter—so you must be a good person.”

Maomao held out a hand to Chue, who said, “Here ya go, Miss Maomao!”

“Thank you, Miss Chue.”

Chue had handed her a bottle. When she opened the lid, the scent of milk drifted out.

“I see you get milk from the cows in your barn,” Maomao remarked.

“That’s right. Once a cow has calved, you have to milk her periodically or the udder gets inflamed. And anyway, cow’s milk is highly nutritious. It helps the body grow.”

“You know a lot about it.”

“My family was once charged with looking after the cattle in the rear palace. We were a storied clan, but we fell from grace, and in the end we were absorbed by another household—you see what I’m saying?”

So that was how she had ended up as Hao’s wife. With her family’s history and knowledge, there would have been many benefits to him in taking her as his wife. Her family’s influence was probably why they had been gifted the cattle from the rear palace when they were no longer needed there.

“So you’ve been giving this nutritious milk to Zhizi.”

Suetsumuhana didn’t reply.

“Besides the obvious symptoms of poisoning, I noticed signs of chronic malnutrition in the child. I’m told she’s fourteen years old, but she’s substantially smaller than average for her age. They say she’s been frail ever since she was young...but what’s the *real* story?”

“Miss Zhizi’s meals are taken care of by our dear concubine,” Chue drawled. “While I was busy checking out the barn, I took the liberty of speaking to the cooks too, you see.”

“They don’t think it must be a vile wife trying to poison a concubine’s child?” Suetsumuhana asked.

“If you were trying to do that, why would you turn to the Empress Dowager about the cursed jar? Master Hao may be the master of the house, but you are its queen, make no mistake,” Maomao said firmly.

“You’re very well-thought-of among the servants, Miss Wife! Oh, what a fine wife, they say!”

Suetsumuhana allowed herself an ironic chuckle. “Heh! You say the strangest things. My husband orders me not to sit beside him at banquets; he tells me to stick to making backroom connections. Did you notice that he didn’t even introduce me yesterday?”

“I did. But I can’t imagine this household could function without you.”

The previous family patriarch had been a real go-getter, it sounded like, but the current one? Not so much. Yet somehow the house carried on—because of Suetsumuhana, Maomao suspected.

Ordinarily, one wouldn't wish to come between a family leader with whom one did not get along and his own half-sister—the Empress Dowager. But Suetsumuhana was canny enough that she could do it.

"Plus, you've borne three whole sons! Oooh, what more could a man ask for in a wife?" Chue added.

Suetsumuhana still looked troubled. She seemed to hold the lowest opinion of herself of anyone there.

"Let's get this back on track," Maomao said. "I see you don't think much of yourself, milady, so I'm going to speak based purely on my own opinions. Whether I'm right or wrong, you needn't say anything."

Suetsumuhana looked at Maomao without so much as twitching a muscle. It looked to Maomao, though, like her pallor had improved somewhat.

Maomao began to reprise what she had discussed with Jinshi and the others the night before. "The concubine has been using Zhizi as a means to curry sympathy with Master Hao. I think you had an intuition that that was why Zhizi is suffering, but you had no actual proof. Until, by sheer chance, the cat unearthed that jar."

Suetsumuhana closed her eyes.

"How long has Zhizi been drinking milk? You don't have to answer, milady; we can ask Zhizi herself."

Suetsumuhana finally spoke, but it was to say, "Please...don't force a child to condemn her own mother. She's been getting milk since before she was even ten years old. I would send it via my son or one of the servants."

Maybe it wouldn't have looked good for Suetsumuhana to go in person.

That explains it. It told Maomao why Zhizi's half-brother was obviously worried about her.

"Let me correct you on this much, at least," Suetsumuhana said. "I am not a good person. I'm a hideous woman, gone nearly mad with jealousy."

Suetsumuhana obviously took great care with her appearance: She wore sumptuous fabric as befitted a household of this quality, but in tones that were carefully subdued so as not to call too much attention to herself. Her nails were well manicured and her hair neatly combed. It seemed almost a point of pride that she didn't cake makeup onto her red nose, the source of so much of her inferiority complex.

"My husband was ensnared by a woman who wept at him: 'Oh, have

pity on poor Zhizi, won't you?' He does like a weak woman, that man. Never even realizing that the woman's refusal to give her daughter anything but thin gruel is nothing short of abuse!"

Suetsumuhana never once said the concubine's name, referring to her only as "the woman"—as much sign as she would give of her contempt. Her refusal to use the woman's name was perhaps one reason she saw herself to be so ugly.

"That woman knows my husband very well. She's hardly the first concubine he's taken in his life, but she's the only one still with him. The others all went away, with suitable compensation in cash. They must have decided that he loved them more than he did me, because they would start to behave as if *they* were his real wife, until their arrogance finally grew repugnant to him and he fell out of love."

Geez! Finish what you start! Maomao thought. It would have been the obvious riposte if they were talking about a dog or cat.

Then again, in the case of humans, it would look awfully compassionate even to offer them cash severance. Or perhaps it was Suetsumuhana who gave them the money. Maybe in exchange for written promises that the women would have no more to do with her family.

Could it be...?

Maomao thought of Lai. He looked much more like his father than his mother. How many of Suetsumuhana's sons were actually hers?

"This woman has played the helpless waif all this time, to keep your husband dangling on the hook," Maomao observed. "And now we know she even used her own daughter for the same purpose."

"That's right. I wanted to think it had nothing to do with me. Just the offspring of a sad concubine; no blood of mine. But then I happened to see that wasted child fly out of her room, grab a frog hopping along the ground, and try to eat it."

Maamei made a face. The idea of eating a frog was probably unimaginable to someone raised in the upper crust.

And tree frogs are toxic, so I can't recommend consuming them.

Even nontoxic frogs might well carry parasites, and couldn't be eaten raw.

"You couldn't resist a jolt of compassion, could you?"

"No. Her stomach was too weak for solid food, so I started by giving her

warm milk. I thought her condition had improved considerably over the last few years, but recently she's begun to decline again."

Suetsumuhana had been wondering why that should be when the cat found the cursed jar. That was when she realized the mother must be poisoning her daughter somehow.

"Why didn't you tell Master Hao that the woman was abusing her daughter?" Maamei asked. As a mother herself, she might well object to Suetsumuhana's conduct.

"Oh, but I did! And what do you think happened? He said to me, 'You're just trying to make her life harder, aren't you?' And can I really blame him? Why shouldn't he see in me a woman who is simply jealous of a younger, more beautiful concubine? Oh, yes. And I *am* jealous of her. So what could I say to him?"

"And you didn't confront the concubine about it?"

Suetsumuhana gave a dry laugh. "If I did that, I would no longer even be able to sneak the girl milk."

Was the concubine that good at currying favor, or was Hao that shallow? Or was it both?

Hao would call the concubine to his bedchamber instead of Suetsumuhana. There, she must have had the chance to tell him the most persuasive lies about how his wife was mistreating her.

"Whatever the case, it was partly my fault that Zhizi had gotten so bad. I wanted to help the child."

So she had conferred with the Empress Dowager—in the most roundabout way.

Maomao gave the bottle of milk a gentle shake. "Zhizi was quite lucky, I see."

"Was she? How, exactly?"

"That you gave her milk. It not only brought her nutrition, but it may have saved her life."

"Ooh! Whatcha mean by that?" Chue chirped, physically poking her head into the conversation.

"Milk and tea don't play well together—it robs the milk of its nutrients. Or in other terms, when the poison in the tea mixed with the milk, it was diluted and weakened. If Zhizi had stopped drinking the milk, she probably would have died in short order."

When Maomao had drunk the poisoned tea all those years ago, Luomen had countered it with milk. Milk, in fact, was quite a common way to neutralize poison in someone's stomach.

Considering the quantity of poison Zhizi had been given, by all rights she should have been dead long ago. And yet she was still alive—almost certainly thanks to the milk.

"It's not an antidote, though, and she will die at this rate," Maomao said.

"This is absurd," Maamei snapped. "If her daughter dies, what will she have left?" She was trying to control herself because they were in front of Suetsumuhana, but she couldn't suppress a flash of anger.

"A fair question," Maomao said. The weaker Zhizi got, the more Hao would sympathize with her mother. The woman might do anything to make herself the star of this tragedy.

"Truth be told, I had an inkling about the concubine, so I looked into her background. She originally comes from the city's pleasure district, doesn't she?" Maomao asked Suetsumuhana.

"Yes. You know everything, don't you?"

In this case, it had been simple: Ask the pleasure district's living encyclopedia, the old madam.

"About seventeen years ago, there was a beautiful and very popular courtesan. She had a number of well-to-do clients, but she lived with one disappointment." Maomao herself didn't know exactly whom the story was about. "This courtesan's favorite apprentice was very sick. The owner of her brothel said to get rid of any girl who couldn't earn her keep, but this woman couldn't bring herself to abandon the young lady. She felt so deeply for her that she would frequently use her own earnings to summon doctors and apothecaries to treat her. Touched by her compassion, customers packed in to see her, and she grew ever more popular."

Here Maomao allowed herself a thin smile. "One day, however, she summoned not her usual doctor, but someone who ran an apothecary shop in the neighborhood—and that was her mistake. Unlike the physicians and the other apothecaries, who were effectively little more than witch doctors, this true apothecary discovered that the apprentice was being poisoned. The courtesan, enraged, chased this person out—but it turned out there were many who had thought the situation was fishy all along. Once the cracks in her story became more obvious, her customers began to distance

themselves. I'm told that the woman promptly got her contract bought out by someone who didn't know of the incident. Her apprentice went on to work for one of the other courtesans, and gradually regained her health."

The real apothecary, needless to say, had been Luomen.

"Am I wrong to think that that courtesan became Master Hao's concubine?"

"I don't know how many times I told him to reconsider his choice," Suetsumuhana said. In the end, she hadn't been able to stop him from buying the woman out.

"What would you like the Moon Prince to do, ma'am?" Maamei asked. It was what Maomao and everyone else there wanted to know.

"Would it be at all possible for him to take Zhizi for himself?"

"Do you understand what you're asking?" Maamei said immediately. Asking a member of the Imperial family to "take" one's daughter could only mean to *marry* her.

They had discovered the reality of the curse, as well as the fact that Zhizi was being poisoned. They had even found out who was doing it. But if they let her become Jinshi's wedded wife, then they had failed in their mission.

"I understand. I know how impertinent my request is. But as a lady-in-waiting, Zhizi could only be a nuisance. She doesn't have the skill or stamina to do the work, not now. My sons regard her as a smart girl, but they're biased. She hasn't even received a proper education."

"Why, then, did you ask that?"

"Zhizi cannot have children. My husband asked a doctor to examine her—he really did think seriously of sending her to the rear palace."

That left Maamei silent. A powerful man's daughter was, ultimately, only a pawn for making a political marriage. Even Maamei, who looked like she had her freedom, knew that very well.

"All of this is because this household has acted so poorly!" Suetsumuhana moaned.

"So you want the Moon Prince to take Miss Zhizi as a way of making it up to her," Chue drawled. "Mmm, can't say I see any benefit at all to the Moon Prince! But I sure see *lots* of benefits for you and Hubby!"

She was right.

"The Moon Prince comes to Master Hao's home and leaves with his

daughter. To all appearances, it would look like the Moon Prince, a man without a single formal concubine, had taken a liking to her and chosen her for his own," Maamei added.

It sure would.

Whatever the case, Hao would be overjoyed. The Imperial younger brother, who had rejected all advances thus far, would have chosen his daughter. So what if the girl couldn't bear children? It might still be enough to tip the balance of power in the palace.

"What do you think, Miss Maomao?" Chue whispered in her ear, giving her a nudge.

What am I supposed to say to that?

Maybe Chue was fishing to see Maomao get jealous. Sadly for Chue, she felt no such thing.

"I would feel sorry for Zhizi if people were to put undue expectations on her shoulders," Maomao replied.

"Hmm, so you're saying the Moon Prince won't have eyes for any other woman?" Chue drawled.

She's got me at every turn, Maomao thought, and resolved to simply not say anything else.

Suetsumuhana seemed to have expected this response, for she gave a quick nod of her head. "The Empress Dowager said the same thing, but I think there may in fact be a number of advantages."

"Such as?"

"She might help him avoid the suitors and marriage talk that are only going to press harder upon him."

Maomao thought it looked like Maamei's and Chue's ears had grown two sizes.

"Ahh, now *that*..."

"...might be attractive," they said between them, accompanied by small glances in Maomao's direction.

"But having such a sly mother-in-law—I don't know about that."

"We would not send that woman with her," Suetsumuhana said firmly. "I can't imagine even my husband would try to press his concubine upon you. She won't be happy about it, but unlike me, she can't afford to defy him."

No matter how much Hao might dote on his concubine, she could never outweigh the Emperor's younger brother in the scales.

“It might change the way people look at my husband, but only temporarily. I hate to admit it, but our household simply doesn’t have the firm foundation that the Gyoku clan does. I don’t think this choice would have much impact to speak of on the balance of power.”

“Hmm,” Maamei muttered. She seemed to think Suetsumuhana might actually be right about that. Hao’s wife was a clever woman, Maomao realized.

“There is still not a *lot* in it for him,” Chue said.

“I have three sons, all of them very capable. We would never forget this kindness. And I can tell you that none of them have the vaulting ambition of my husband.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?”

“My husband may look young, but he’ll be fifty-five this year. Do you suppose he can go on for another decade?”

Meaning the next head of the family would be someone loyal to Jinshi.

She’s not one of those wives who just blindly supports her husband.

Suetsumuhana was playing the long game, and she was sure she would win. Maybe that was what had given her the strength to endure so much misfortune. The one she hated most of all wasn’t Hao’s concubine—it was Hao.

Thanks to his half-sister, who had been so lovely at such a young age, Hao had powerful connections in the palace. But he himself was a man of undistinguished abilities and not a particularly good judge of character.

It was he, then, who stood in polar opposition to Suetsumuhana.

“I said he might not live a decade,” Suetsumuhana remarked, “but I wouldn’t be that surprised if everything were wrapped up neatly within a year.”

Maomao deliberately didn’t ask what exactly she meant by that.

I don’t want to know.

It was a question whose answer could only bring her more trouble, she thought.

One thing, however, she was certain of: Suetsumuhana’s revenge on Hao had already begun.

Chapter 12: Cleaning House

“My, my! What a thing we’ve stumbled on!” Chue, Maamei’s sister-in-law, said blithely.

The trio had left Hao’s estate and dropped Maomao off at her dorm. Now they disembarked the carriage and trotted toward the Moon Prince’s palace.

“What’re you gonna tell the Moon Prince? Anything?”

“I don’t think we have a choice. We have to tell him,” Maamei said with a sigh. It was not Maamei’s or the others’ place to answer Hao’s wife in the matter of the match with Zhizi. It would have been a great time for Maomao to show some kind of reaction, but Maamei couldn’t force her to do anything. Chue was more suited to that kind of prompting, anyway—but she’d sent Maomao on her way home without missing a beat.

“Knowing you, Chue, I was sure you would bring Maomao to the Moon Prince.”

“Miss Maomao has work tomorrow, you know. And Miss Chue has some compunctions of her own!”

“*Compunctions*?”

Maamei and Chue had known each other since before Chue’s marriage, so when they were alone together, they quickly reverted to the friendly banter they had always shared.

“How do you think Miss Maomao would feel if the Moon Prince asked her opinion about this? Let Miss Chue put it this way: How would *you* feel if Mister Bakin asked you to look after a concubine of his? Even if it was just for show?”

“Ahh,” Maamei said. “I would *not* be happy.”

“Didn’t think so! It’s such a convenient excuse to say you’re asking your partner about it because you respect their opinion. But to Miss Chue, it just looks like passing the buck!”

“I agree. You’re exactly right.”

A man might claim to be showing respect for his partner, but to the

woman, it was more likely to feel like he was pushing responsibility onto her. If the two were in different positions or thought about things differently, they were likely to start talking past each other. And even if they talked it out and each understood where the other was coming from, it didn't mean they would accept the other person's take.

"Don't get me wrong—I don't think Miss Maomao would have a particular problem with it. I'm sure she sees the upsides as well as anyone. If you consider what the safflower lady must be thinking about, I can't say it doesn't seem like a half-decent plan!"

"You think? I'd say it causes a lot more problems than it solves..."

Chue narrowed her already small eyes. "The lady said she wasn't sure if her honored husband would survive another decade. That if things went poorly, he might not even make it a year."

"So she did. Tell me we're not going to have a case of a wife poisoning her husband next."

The two spoke in whispers, but were still careful not to use any actual names. You never knew who could be listening.

"Maybe not—but maybe *somebody* would."

"Somebody? That only leaves her sons, or else—"

"A concubine loses her daughter—the tool she's been using to prop herself up—so what does she do? You think she adopts some other li'l critter?"

Chue was better acquainted than Maamei with the darkness of the human heart.

"You're saying she would move to poisoning the husband?"

"Miss Maomao asked me to go and chat with the madam, and as a matter of fact, I turned up one other little episode." Chue's speech was punctuated by the distinctive pitter-patter of her footsteps. "This courtesan who doted on her apprentice—one of her steadiest customers visited her once every three days, at a minimum." Chue put a finger to her lips. "D'you suppose she put a little spell on him?"

"A spell?"

"A spell they use in the western region to keep a husband from cheating! Every morning, you put a dash of a slow-acting poison in his breakfast, and every night you give him the antidote. If he's out all night having an affair, he won't get better!"

Chue was quite knowledgeable about the ways of the west.

“Of course, it doesn’t have to be poison. You could use narcotics. Yeah, that would get someone coming back every three days—or sooner!”

Chue’s suggestion made Maamei break out in a cold sweat.

“The doctors and apothecaries that woman called to treat her apprentice were all hacks and witch doctors, so she would have had plenty of ingredients.”

“You’re saying...”

“Uh-huh! I didn’t say anything about it to Miss Maomao, but knowing her, she can probably guess.” Chue crossed her arms and nodded in affirmation of her own point.

“Why didn’t you say anything about it in front of the wife?”

“If I said something, Miss Maomao would be obliged to help, wouldn’t she?”

Chue had her there. And who would Maomao have to help? Hao.

“I’m sure Miss Maomao doesn’t want to say what she guesses. Once speculation turns to certainty, then your back’s to the wall. But while the outcome is in a gray area, Miss Maomao can still cut them loose.”

No doubt the concubine would cast a “spell” on Hao to make sure he couldn’t get away from her. It didn’t matter what spell it was exactly; Hao would get weaker and weaker.

Maomao would have agonized over whether to give an honest answer or to stay quiet.

“Miss Chue doesn’t mind doing the dirty work,” Chue drawled. “’Cause she knows what kind of idiots try to keep their hands clean.” She’d lost the use of her right arm because of someone who was hung up on bringing criminals to justice under the law. “True, life might be easier if the husband were taken care of in a year. Mm, it could take a lot of arranging or get pretty messy, but in the grand scheme of things, it might be for the best.”

Now Maamei saw why Hao’s wife hadn’t tried to drive the concubine out. It wasn’t because of preference or pity, but simply because she saw the other women as a tool to be used. Maamei wanted to believe that the woman had felt something for her husband at some point. But by now, at the very least, there was no such feeling at all.

And it was Hao himself who had made her that way.

“Oooh, that safflower lady is a tough cookie! Her sons aren’t ready to

step into the limelight just yet, but they're sure made of better stuff than their dad, and if they really aren't as greedy as he is, things could be a lot easier for a while. And the Gyoku clan isn't that combative, so any third parties would just have to be kept in check."

As they conversed, they arrived at the Moon Prince's pavilion.

Maamei paused. "If you could kindly not say anything to the Moon Prince about Master Hao's future."

"Don't have to tell me twice!" Chue said, snapping off a salute. "Dirty work is for minions, and that's the truth!"

Outside the Moon Prince's door was Maamei's moron of a younger brother, namely Basen.

"Has the Moon Prince returned?" she asked.

"Yes," Basen answered and led them inside. The Moon Prince was there, looking at papers that appeared to be leftover work. Maamei didn't see Suiren; she must have been getting dinner ready.

"Ah. Maamei. How was it?"

"Sir," she said, and then she and Chue reported what had happened. Chue seemed particularly full of little interjections, perhaps on account of Suiren's absence. They told the Moon Prince all he needed to know while passing over what ought to be left out.

As Maamei had expected, the Moon Prince was left clutching his head at the wife's suggestion.

"Hao's wife is some operator," he said.

"What will you do, sir?" Maamei asked, and awaited his answer. He could accept or refuse at his leisure: That was the power of being Imperial younger brother.

"What *will* I do? Maybe I should ask Maomao if she knows a treatment method."

"Wha?" Maamei goggled in spite of herself.

"Something the matter?" the Moon Prince asked.

"No, sir, but... Does that mean you plan to take Master Hao's daughter after all?"

"If I don't, she'll die before long, won't she?"

True enough—yet privately, Maamei began to boil with anger. She'd harbored a vague hope that the Moon Prince would have some better solution.

“Is there no other way?” she asked. “All that needs to happen is the concubine and her daughter must be separated, no? You don’t have to take her in to achieve that.”

She and Chue had agreed to bring this matter to the Moon Prince on the basis that there was at least a modicum of potential benefit to him. But Maamei found she couldn’t stop herself from saying, “Sir, you would ask Maomao to tend to the seed of her own destruction?”

“Sister!” Basen exclaimed, but Maamei ignored him.

“The Empress Dowager is—well, she’s the Empress Dowager! Why doesn’t she deal with the matter herself? Why should you be obliged to accept all the risk?”

The Moon Prince heaved a sigh. Maamei knew she had gone too far. But if she started to hold back, there would be no one around the Moon Prince to tell him the unvarnished truth.

“Do you believe that Hao would listen to the Empress Dowager—my mother? Really listen to her? From his perspective, before she’s the mother of the present Emperor, she is his half-sister.”

“But sir...”

Hao did indeed have a way of bulling ahead based on his own assumptions. Maamei was sure he thought less of the Empress Dowager for having been the daughter of a concubine.

“But I am both his nephew and the Emperor’s younger brother. My mother brought the matter to me because she believed Hao would listen to me.”

“I still object to anything that encourages Master Hao to get higher on his horse than he already is,” Maamei said, but in fact, there was something even more pressing on her mind: How would Maomao take this?

“Knowing Maomao, she would choose to save the girl rather than abandon her, don’t you think?” the Moon Prince said.

Maamei stared at him, her jaw slack.

“I understand what you’re trying to say, Maamei—believe me, I do. But all I need is to *not* give Hao an excuse to be more full of himself, yes?” He stretched mightily. “From the look on your face, I take it you thought I was going to accept the girl as my concubine, even if only for form’s sake?”

“Aren’t you, sir?”

“I’m sure my honored mother felt pity for her poor niece. Have you

forgotten the nature of what she's done in the past?"

"What do you mean?"

The Empress Dowager was famous for her deep compassion. She had created a haven where the women whom the former emperor had lain with could take shelter in the rear palace itself; she had abolished slavery and the making of eunuchs. These were not simple things to do, not even for an empress dowager, but her force of will as the sovereign's mother had accomplished them.

And what, in turn, had these things accomplished?

Gathering the former emperor's bedfellows in one place had enabled them to collaborate in the awful rebellion of the Shi clan.

The eunuchs were not getting any younger. The shrinking of the rear palace meant that wasn't a problem for now, but the fact that the only eunuchs they could currently add to the staff were those who had been castrated as slaves of the foreign tribes made finding new personnel a challenge.

Further, there was no more system of slavery—but only superficially. In fact, enslavement continued, merely in other forms. There were fewer slaves, admittedly, but they were obtained through more nefarious methods than ever.

To be deeply compassionate was not always such a good thing.

There were certain eras when this Empress Dowager might have been seen as vile—but in an age where the empress regnant had controlled her son like a puppet and one vixen had nearly brought the nation to its knees, the Empress Dowager got a pass.

As Maamei mentally reviewed all these things, she realized that asking someone to take one little niece as a concubine was modest in comparison.

Especially when the Moon Prince seemed to have a way around it.

"You said the girl is suffering from malnutrition and poisoning. I'm being begged to do something for a child when even a doctor would give up hope."

"Yes..."

"So I need simply send her where there are knowledgeable medical practitioners, she can be given copious nutrition, and where even Hao will have to keep his mouth shut."

"Ahh!" Chue clapped her hands. "I know just the place!"

“Miss Chue, are you talking about...”

“Oh, yes! There’s plenty of fresh produce from the...gardens? Fields? Whatever you want to call them. So lots of nutrition! And for some reason they have freeloaders who know all about medicine!”

“And best of all, it will be near her family’s home,” the Moon Prince added.

It finally clicked for Maamei. “You’re going to send her to Master Lakan’s house?”

“The very same.”

What *would* he think of next, Maamei wondered.

“But Master Lakan wouldn’t just do that out of the goodness of his heart,” she protested. She remembered that he was supposed to be very good at bringing capable people into his fold, wherever they might come from. Zhizi, however, was just a sick child, with no obvious talents to benefit Lakan.

“Master Lakan doesn’t seem like the type to mind too much if one or two extra freeloaders move in,” Chue observed.

“And that adopted son of his... Lahan, was it? I assume he’d accept any order from the Moon Prince,” Maamei reflected.

“Hoo hoo hoo! That might cause a whole *different* kind of trouble, though!” Chue said with a knowing grin. “Speaking of, I hear Lahan’s Brother has started growing a new type of vegetable. We should go have a taste sometime!”

“I-If it’s some variety of potato, I don’t want it,” the Moon Prince said.

“Oh, no, I think it’s a berry. Round and red, but it might be out of season soon!” She stuck out her tongue.

Judging by Chue’s reaction, Maamei took it that this might actually solve their problem. She started to feel silly for worrying so much. She was relieved that her noble minion had come up with an alternate plan.

Chapter 13: Tomatoes

The hush of soil being overturned could be heard everywhere in Lakan's mansion. Junjie had been agog when he first saw the sight, but by now he was used to it. The mansion's vast garden, probably built up over years and years, was being transformed into a field. Junjie thought he could still hear the despairing cries of the gardeners in the western capital.

There was Lahan's Brother, plowing the earth. He'd spent all his time in the western capital doing the same thing, and now here he was doing it in the royal city. Smack in the middle of it, in fact, in the garden of one of the city's finest estates.

Junjie had objected, in his way, to Lahan's Brother's appropriation of the garden in Gyokuen's mansion, but it had been an emergency, what with the famine inflicted by the locust swarm. That had been no time to savor exquisite garden views. Lahan's Brother had looked downright heroic, working tirelessly to produce crops to feed the people.

But now, Junjie was starting to think he was overdoing it.

Lahan's Brother insisted that *Lahan's Brother* as such was not his name. He was Lahan's older brother—and Lahan was the son of the master of this household, or so Junjie gathered. When he asked if Lahan's Brother was the man's son too, then, he was told in no uncertain terms that he was not. A commoner like Junjie could only marvel at the contortions of the nobility's family trees.

Speaking of contortions, those family trees were hardly more tangled than the relationships in this household.

"Hullo, Junjie!" Sifan called amiably. He was an orphan that the master of the house had taken in. He was younger than Junjie, but very smart, so sometimes talking to him felt like talking with a grown-up. With him were Wufan and Liufan—numbers five and six—a girl and boy who never left Sifan's side. Junjie had been told that the strange names were so that the master who had collected these children could more easily remember them, but to him it made them sound like criminals. The kids themselves,

however, didn’t seem to mind.

The three of them were carrying brooms, buckets, and other cleaning supplies.

“What’s up? Need help cleaning?” Junjie asked.

“Yeah. I guess we’re getting a new live-in, so we’re supposed to set up a room for them.”

Sifan always had work for Junjie to do, so he was never left idle. That was fine by Junjie; he needed to send money back to his family.

“All right. Did Master Lakan bring someone else home?”

“No—it’s Master Lahan this time! A sick person the Moon Prince asked him to take care of.”

“Huh!”

Junjie trotted after Sifan and the others. For all the members packing Lakan’s household, the place also had a surprising number of unused rooms. This was land with a pedigree; it had been around since the capital was moved here, so it had every right and opportunity to be big, but the La clan didn’t number very many people or have many servants, so there was plenty of space.

Sifan headed for one of the annexes. It was right near one of the other outbuildings, in fact.

“Isn’t this... Isn’t this right near where Lady Yao lives?” Junjie asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“Are we sure about that? I mean, if this person is sick, should we really let them live right near our guest?”

“Lady Yao and her friend are medical staff, right? They can earn their keep. It’s like... Okay, they pay money, but I have to say I don’t really get why they’re here.”

Sifan might have sounded harsh, but the truth was that Junjie had wondered the same thing. He just hadn’t had the courage to say it.

“Anyway, lackeys only have one job: do what they’re told. So let’s clean this place up and get it over with.”

“Yessir!” the others chorused.

So the cleaning of the annex began, under Sifan’s direction. It was a small building, but there was an outhouse nearby, and it got plenty of sun.

“Sifan, there’s a hole in the wall!” Wufan said, pointing at the offending spot.

“Okay, see if there’s anything else that needs fixing up. Then we can tell our sis Sanfan, and she can get it repaired.”

“Gotcha!” Wufan said.

“’Tcha!” Liufan chirped, imitating her.

“I wonder if patching the holes will be enough to keep the place warm,” Sifan said.

“If they’re sick, we’d probably better have a brazier or something ready to go too,” Junjie replied as he scrubbed the floor. Although a few spots caught his attention, the room was surprisingly clean.

“Yeah... Underfloor heating would be perfect, but they don’t have that in the capital.”

“Underfloor heating?”

“It’s something rich people’s houses have up north,” Sifan said.

“It makes the floor real warm!” Wufan added.

“Ahwm!” Liufan echoed.

Liufan had poor language skills in spite of his age. Word was that Wufan and Liufan had pretty much come as a package when Lakan had taken Sifan in, and that without Sifan the kids would have been dead in a ditch somewhere long ago.

Junjie opened the window—and was confronted with something very red. “Yikes!” he exclaimed. The color was so vivid that for a moment he thought it must be blood or gore. On closer inspection, though, he realized it was fruit.

“Oh, *that*,” Sifan said.

“Lahan’s Brother’s dryin’ ’em!”

“Innum!”

Junjie was aware of them. In summary, Lahan’s Brother had planted seedlings of a mysterious red crop. He’d said they were a vegetable, but to Junjie they looked like jujubes.

Supposedly, Lahan’s Brother’s father had originally acquired them purely to admire, but since they seemed distinctly edible, Lahan’s Brother had decided to try growing them as food. They were watery and tart, and you could eat them raw, or stew them, or fry them—whatever you wanted. After further research, now Lahan’s Brother was experimenting to see if they could be dried.

Junjie admired Lahan’s Brother’s accomplishments. Truly, a farmer

whose skills had been acknowledged by the Moon Prince himself was on another level.

“Heeeey!” Speak of the devil. There was Lahan’s Brother with his hoe. “Sorry, I put them out to dry and just left them there. Are you using that building?”

He had come from working in the fields and was soaked with sweat. Even though it was the season of frosts, he wore only a light shirt and his skin was glowing. Back in the western capital, he had been known to work in nothing but work shorts, but that had stopped when he returned to the capital. He just couldn’t do it, he claimed, when there were young ladies around. Junjie had always wondered: What exactly did that make Maomao and Chue?

“Wonder if they’ve dried out by now,” Lahan’s Brother said. He picked up each of the red globes in turn and inspected it to see if it had dried. “A little longer, maybe... Anyway, I can get them out of your way.”

“I’ll help you,” Junjie said.

“Great. Take them to the storehouse over there.”

Evidently the reason the annex had been so orderly was because Lahan’s Brother had been using it for storage. Junjie saw other farming implements here and there around the building, so Lahan’s Brother must have been making regular trips there.

“What’s going on? We have another guest coming?” Lahan’s Brother asked.

“Yes, sir. A sick person, joining us on the orders of the Moon Prince.”

“Someone who’s sick, huh? They’ll need lots of vegetables, then! Any idea what they’ve got?”

“I’m afraid I didn’t hear.”

Just as they returned from depositing the red fruit in the storehouse, Yao and En’en got home. Lahan’s Brother quickly straightened his clothing and made sure to look alert. He was handsome enough, but somehow the scurry to dust off made him look comical.

“Why, hello, En’en!” he said as the young ladies arrived at their annex. The two of them were frequently on different work schedules, but En’en would usually wait until Yao got off for the day.

“Oh, Ju—” En’en started, but then with a look at Junjie she said, “I mean, Lahan’s Brother!” All evidence was that she was aware of Lahan’s

Brother’s real name, but she wouldn’t let Junjie know what it was. He had the impression that Lahan’s Brother had made some sort of vow to the gods or Buddhas that prevented him from revealing his name.

Lahan’s Brother leaned on a column of the annex and gave En’en a smile. “Are you done with work? If you’re feeling tired, I have some vegetables that can soothe fatigue and give your skin a healthy glow! What do you say?”

“Thank you very much. If you could just leave them off to the side in the kitchen like you always do, it would be a big help.”

“I’m on it!”

Junjie had observed such exchanges quite a few times by now. It made him want to ask what exactly it was. A conversation between a chef and her purveyor? The question rose to his lips, but he held his tongue. Everyone wanted to say it—even Sifan, Wufan, and Liufan could have cracked the joke—but no one else did, so what right did a newcomer like Junjie have?

“Is everything else going all right?” Lahan’s Brother asked.

“Hmm... Well, it’s getting chilly, so if you have any nice, warm spices, that would be great.”

“Sure thing! I asked Maomao for some ginger, so you can have that. I got a few things that I think would make interesting ingredients, too, so I’ll bring those by.”

So far, so businesslike. This would be the perfect place to segue into some idle, friendly chatter, Junjie thought, but Lahan’s Brother only prattled on about vegetable recommendations. En’en was wearing a new hair ornament today, but he didn’t even notice!

“Hello, Lahan’s Brother. Thank you for always sharing your vegetables with us,” En’en’s mistress, Yao, said with a bow.

“Not at all. Couldn’t be happier to do it!” Lahan’s Brother returned easily.

En’en looked on intently the whole time; she seemed to be taking stock of him.

“By the way, I hear a sick person is moving into this annex over here. You know about it?” Lahan’s Brother asked.

“Yes, Maomao wrote to us with a bunch of instructions. Apparently the biggest problem is malnutrition, so we’ll want to feed her lots of your produce!”

Was it Junjie's imagination, or was Lahan's Brother less awkward with Yao than he was with En'en? If nothing else, he chatted less like a businessman and more like a neighbor.

"The patient is a girl, still just fourteen years old, so we'll have to make sure to take good care of her."

"A girl? Fourteen? We'll have to make sure to keep her away from Lahan, is what we'll have to do!" Lahan's Brother said, glaring.

"You're right, we absolutely *must* keep Master Lahan away from here at all costs," En'en agreed, although she seemed to mean it in a different way.

"We're freeloading too, En'en, so I don't think we're ones to talk. If this girl is really sick, though, they'll be counting on us!" Yao said hesitantly.

For more than six months now, something about Lakan's household had nagged at Junjie. This girl Yao looked very grown-up, but emotionally she still seemed immature. Her pampered upbringing might be a part of it, but her servant En'en seemed to be a factor that further limited her information about the outside world. Maybe it was worries about her own behavior that caused her to charge ahead like she did.

Why was Junjie keeping such a sharp eye on Yao? Sifan. Sifan was wiser than his years, and very good at reading people. A very wise assistant, Junjie thought. But Sifan couldn't talk about Yao in front of the other adults, especially Sanfan, while Wufan and Liufan were too young for the subject. Instead, he often confided to Junjie, and that was how Junjie had come to know a bit more about the web of relationships within the household than he had perhaps wanted to.

"You listen to me, Yao. It's great that you want to help people and everything, but if Lahan has strong-armed you into this, you tell me. He may be a tousle-haired, cold-blooded four-eyes, but he's still my little brother, and I'll give him a piece of my mind!"

"No, nobody forced us to do anything," Yao said.

"All right, try not to look so stiff about it, then. If you're that exhausted, your patient will catch it too! If you're doing this out of a sense of obligation, I'm sure we could hire another doctor. This is something the Moon Prince wants—I'm sure there'd be no shortage of funding. Or we could just call Maomao. And Great-Uncle Luomen even comes back from time to time. Don't stress so much about it."

He patted Yao on the shoulder. She looked a little startled, but not

uncomfortable; she gave him a slight smile.

“Well, *that* won’t help him any,” muttered Sifan, sidling up to Junjie.

“Why not? I mean, help him with what?”

“Ahh, I’m just saying that if a few arrows were to point a slightly different way, things could go very smoothly. Plus it would clean things up for Sanfan.”

“Oh... Really?”

Sifan didn’t respond, but simply shook his head and repeated, “Won’t help him at all.” He pitched out the water in his bucket, which had gone filthy from cleaning.

Chapter 14: Yao’s Growth

Maomao was at the freak strategist’s house. She didn’t *want* to be, but she’d had no choice.

“You’re the one who dragged us into this,” said Yao, who had come out to greet her.

“I sort of got dragged into it, myself,” Maomao replied.

“Don’t you always?” Yao said with a sigh.

Yao and En’en were off today, and Maomao had received special dispensation to miss work. Some might look askance at three medical assistants missing work on the same day, but it was what it was. Dr. Liu had acceded with a “Gah!” when he heard the orders came directly from the Moon Prince. The old doctor, a.k.a. Doctor Old, a.k.a. Dr. Lao, was back at the village on the front lines of the smallpox outbreak, so Maomao and the others had to run many of their requests by Dr. Liu instead. That could be a bit intimidating, but at least they had safely obtained their time off.

I hope Dr. Lao hurries back...

And that Yo would come with him.

“Anyway, come on in. Mostly, En’en and I have been keeping an eye on her. But I hear Master Luomen will be coming soon.”

“Do you know when?”

Maomao herself didn’t get to see Luomen much anymore, since he was technically assigned to the rear palace. Eunuchs were allowed more freedom to come and go than the palace ladies were, but considering the recent arrival of a new high consort and the general unreliability of the quack doctor, Luomen didn’t get out much.

“I’m not sure. Sometime in the next few days, I think.”

Maomao scowled. She wanted to see Luomen, but she did *not* want to see the freak strategist. What to do, what to do?

“First things first. Where’s the patient?”

“In an annex near ours. En’en’s getting her meal ready now. But Maomao...”

“What?”

“Does this girl really come from a noble household?” Yao asked, openly perplexed.

“Well, hmm. She’s supposed to be fourteen years old and suffering from malnutrition.”

“She certainly is that.” Yao’s eyes went to the other annex.

“No! Don’t do that!” they heard En’en shout. Maomao blinked; it was very unusual for En’en to raise her voice.

The two of them rushed over to the patient’s room. There they found En’en, looking panicked and holding a stewpot over her head. Someone was stretching a desperate hand toward the pot.

“What the—?” Maomao said, her eyes going wide in spite of herself.

Zhizi clung to En’en, trying to get her hands on the stewpot. Her mouth was smeared with congee.

“She looks less like a proper young lady and more like a starving animal,” Yao said.

“I would agree,” Maomao said.

Come to think of it... She’d heard that Zhizi had been so hungry that she’d tried to eat frogs from the garden.

“I have to say, she struck me as somewhat more...demure,” Maomao said.

“How do you figure?”

When Maomao had met Zhizi, she had been wracked with malnutrition and poison, leaving her too weak to do anything. But those had been the only factors holding her back.

“Why, she’s so spirited I almost didn’t recognize her,” Maomao said. “You’ve done an excellent job tending to your patient.”

“Stop staring and do something!” En’en yelped.

Yao and Maomao hurried to pry Zhizi off. There was no trace now of the quiet, withdrawn girl; she howled like an animal. “Food! Food! Give me fooooood!”

She sounded young but unmistakably desperate. Her ribs, visible under her rumpled nightshirt, and her twiglike limbs would make anyone want to let her eat her fill.

That included Maomao, Yao, and En'en—as well as one other person, a professional in the matter of supplying foodstuffs.

"Aren't you going to give her anything?" Lahan's Brother asked, clearly irritated. On his back was a basket full of root vegetables.

"I would love to, but we can't," Maomao replied.

"Why not?"

"If you give too much nutrition to someone in a state of starvation, they'll die."

"They will?!" Lahan's Brother had been about to pull a turnip from his basket, but he discreetly put it back.

"Uh-huh. Once, there was a castle that was under siege..."

For a long, long time, the castle starved, and when the siege was finally lifted, the people threw themselves at their porridge. After which they started dropping like flies.

Maomao had heard the story from her old man and had mentioned its lessons to Yao and En'en in her letter. En'en, Maomao saw, was faithfully carrying out her duty.

"You don't think the porridge was, you know, poisoned or something?" Lahan's Brother asked.

"No. Those who took their meals more slowly survived. We don't know why, but it seems like the fast eaters essentially surprised their stomachs."

"Whoever heard of dying of stomach surprise?!" Now Lahan's Brother delicately put the basket of turnips in a corner where it wouldn't be seen.

"The point is, if we allow her to wolf down her food in her current state, it could kill her. We'll increase the amount bit by bit, so we'll *all* just have to live with it for the time being."

Even with Maomao and Yao restraining her, however, Zhizi snatched at the congee. "If I don't eat it now, who knows when I'll have another chance?!"

"I do! You'll get it! We'll give you lunch in four hours!" En'en exclaimed.

Zhizi clearly didn't believe her. She was like a dog still eager to be fed. It spoke to how many years she had endured her terrible treatment.

I can't just abandon her, Maomao thought, but at the same time, she reflected that she was going soft. Just think how many starving children there were in the world. If she tried to save each and every one of them, Maomao was the one who would end up dead in a ditch. That was why she had always simply pretended not to see them.

But Zhizi here, that was at least one person Maomao could save—and so she couldn't simply turn a blind eye.

There were times, however, that one *did* have to look away. Maomao took a dried squid from the folds of her robe and held it out. "You can chew on this to tide yourself over."

"Oh!" Zhizi snatched the squid from her and started gnawing on it like a dog with a bone.

"Phew," En'en said, making her exit with the rest of the congee. Lahan's Brother, maybe feeling that he had overstepped his bounds, also promptly showed himself out. He'd probably come by in hopes of offering En'en some vegetables, but it had turned out to be the wrong moment.

"All right, sleep tight. I promise we'll wake you when it's time to eat," Yao said. Maomao couldn't tell if Zhizi was even listening; she was still working assiduously on the squid. Maomao would have liked to ask her some questions, but it seemed prudent to wait until she was a little calmer.

A table and chairs stood outside the patient's room, and Maomao and Yao sat down without really thinking about it.

"So you're keeping a close eye on her?"

"We sure are. You know her. Last night I caught her trying to make a break for the kitchen."

Now, this *kid is trouble.*

Maomao felt a little bad about it, but Yao looked pleased enough.

"Yao," she said, taking an extra look to make sure En'en was out of earshot. Knowing her punctilious attitude, she would probably make sure the stewpot was spick-and-span before she came back. "I think that girl's going to be here for a good long time. Does that bother you at all?"

She was thinking of what Changsha had said the other day. Someone had to talk to Yao eventually.

"You're being awfully roundabout," Yao said, hugging one knee. Not a very ladylike posture.

With much hesitation, Maomao asked, "How do you *feel* about Lahan?"

“I hardly know myself! But I just can’t bring myself to back away. Besides, when I think about how to broach the subject at this late date...it just hurts too much. I can’t.” Her voice seemed to get smaller and smaller, and she buried her face in her knee.

Maomao folded her arms. *Now what?*

Normally, she would have been on the receiving end of this conversation; she tried to imagine what Chue would ask in her place.

I wish Chue could just have this talk for *me.*

That was unlikely, though. Chue only had those conversations because Maomao was involved, and probably wouldn’t have had much to say to Yao. She was easygoing and got along with everybody, but her approach to relationships could be even more relentlessly logical than Maomao’s.

Then there was the fact that Yao didn’t know Chue either.

Maomao was on tenterhooks whether what she was saying would reach Yao, but Yao had done some growing up in all this time.

“Knowing you, Maomao, I suppose you’ve already noticed, but let me spell it out. Part of me is thrilled that Zhizi is here now. Yes, she takes an awful lot of minding and it’s a lot of work, but having her around gives me the sense that I have a reason to be here. I’m a helpless, immature, filthy-minded person. I may complain about all the effort Zhizi takes, but on some level, the worse she is, the better off I feel like *I* am.”

Yao spoke softly, careful that Zhizi shouldn’t hear her from inside the room.

Yao carried herself as befitted her upbringing, but she didn’t seem to have much self-confidence. She was looking for something that would give it to her. Insofar as she seemed to be aware that she was doing it, though, Maomao felt there was no real problem.

She also had a suspicion as to where this lack of confidence came from.

The incident with the Shaoh shrine maiden.

Yao had once been the food taster for a shrine maiden from Shaoh. It had resulted in damage to her internal organs thanks to a plot on the part of the shrine maiden and some coconspirators; even now, Yao couldn’t eat anything too rich. She knew she would never be appointed food taster again, and the concern about her health could represent a limitation on the jobs that would be available to her.

It wasn’t Yao’s fault; she had been used. But her name had been sullied,

and for political reasons. She abhorred the fact that she had been unable to protect such an important foreign figure.

In fact, the Shaohnese shrine maiden was still alive, but outwardly was supposed to be dead. The shrine maiden was living in Li at that very moment, but would likely never again take the public stage.

And Yao doesn't know any of that.

So she felt her responsibility for the situation keenly.

I can't tell her...

Maomao would never reveal the truth. She wished she could, but she absolutely must not. It was a betrayal of Yao, but also the only way to keep her safe.

"I think I understand what you're trying to say, Maomao," Yao told her. "When Zhizi gets better, I'll plan to leave this house too."

"Oh, you will?"

"Yes, but please don't tell En'en yet. Zhizi needs to take her time recovering, and I'm afraid she would rush things."

Yao saw En'en quite clearly. Yao, though, couldn't stay the same forever. At least she was young enough to be flexible.

"I think you're doing things right," Maomao said. It was the only way she could convey matters to Yao. The girl was still just seventeen. There should have been any number of paths open to her, but out of rebellion toward her uncle, she had become an assistant in the medical office.

Quite frankly, medical work was dirty and smelly and hard. Yao's choice was the precise opposite of those ladies who took service at court in hopes of polishing themselves up so they could find a husband. She did her job tirelessly, refused to quit, and even now she was doing everything she could to convince them to teach her surgical skills.

"You should get out a little more. Meet people and experience things. I mean, it's true that as a medical assistant, you've already experienced more than some women in this world, but..."

At the moment, Yao didn't seem to appreciate just how capable she was. Maomao honestly believed that if she went to some other department, she would find herself indispensable almost immediately.

"You want to continue down the path of medicine, I assume?" Maomao asked.

"Yes. But I don't want to travel all over the place like you do, Maomao."

So Yao really didn’t intend to give up her medical studies.

“Eh, I’ve got a bit of a jack-of-all-trades streak.”

Maomao would have been perfectly happy to lead a somewhat calmer life, but bustling around seemed to be her lot. She’d never had smallpox, so she was spared being swept up in the current crisis, but who knew what might yet happen?

She debated pressing a little more into Yao’s business but decided to leave it at this for now. If she went too far, it would only backfire—something she knew all too well from experience.

“Yo is off somewhere right now. Do you think she’s all right?” Maomao asked.

“I think it’s somewhere where there’s a smallpox outbreak. I heard she won’t get it, though.”

“Yes... Because she’s had it once before, I believe.”

“That’s why she always wears long sleeves, huh?” Yao said, letting out a sigh. “If I got it, do you think they’d take me along?”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. There is no safe way to get smallpox.”

Not yet, anyway...

Maomao thought of the man with the half-hidden shit-eating grin. Kokuyou must be out at the village with Yo and the others by now.

If they could really use the method Kokuyou’s teacher had invented for giving someone smallpox, that would be big. If it were possible, they wouldn’t have to struggle like they did now.

Maybe I should write him a letter, Maomao thought. She didn’t know if she would get an answer, but she wanted to hear what he had to say—and not just in the scheduled reports to the medical staff.

Chapter 15: Letters

Dear Maomao,

We've finally put Zhizi on a normal amount of food. She's much more cooperative now that she can eat regularly, and has gone from feral dog to more like a puppy in training.

At first I couldn't believe you had sent us such a wild child, but it turns out she's a perfectly good girl as long as her belly is full. Lady Yao makes all of Zhizi's food herself, so it's only natural that she should be doing so well.

Speaking of Lady Yao, she's recently started to master not only knife skills but cooking as well—although I would be more than happy to take care of everything in the domain of food if nothing else!

She's also finally started to open up to the idea of moving out, and is looking for a place. We still have Zhizi to worry about, so I don't think we would move before the turn of the year, and considering matters of safety, I suspect we'll end up not far from Master Lakan's mansion, but it's a big first step in any case.

I'll let you know when we find out where we're going.

Sincerely,
En'en

En'en was, well, En'en. Yao seemed so eager to strike out on her own that it somewhat mystified Maomao that she would take En'en wherever she ended up going, but Maomao eventually decided that no reply would be necessary, and threw away her half-written response.

Hey Maomao!

Long time no see! I thought maybe I should shoot a quick note to the person who helped me get this job. I know you sent me one and it's taken me forever to get back to you, but what can I say? I've been so busy! Sorry

’bout that!

I can’t say this is a very nice place to work! The villagers are constantly haranguing me about how they want to leave and leave soon, but, well, that’s how things go sometimes. You asked if Yo is all right? Yeah, she’s holding up, but I’ll have a chat with the higher-ups and see if I can get her sent back for a visit. Her dad’s also here! They’re both adamant that they’ll keep on working, but there’s nothing wrong with spending New Year’s having a nice time with your family, right?

You know Dr. Lao, yeah? That guy is something else! I think he’s pretty open to sending Yo back home as well. Now, there’s *a guy who knows the score. Plus sometimes he gives me snacks. Good guy.*

Anyway, look after Yo for me if and when she goes home. Don’t give her back until you think she’s all right to go! I’ll come back with her this time, so scare up a place for us to stay, all right? I’m sure the doctors will be more than happy to pay for my lodging!

Oh, one question. Do you know anywhere near the capital where they keep plenty of cows and horses?

See ya,
Kokuyou

“Yo and Kokuyou are coming back, huh?”

Yo must find the work demanding. Maomao would have to make sure she really did stay in the capital until she was feeling recuperated, just like Kokuyou said.

Cows and horses, though? What was that about? Whatever, she could give him an introduction to Red Plum Village, and that would do the trick. With that in mind, she set the letter from Kokuyou aside and picked up the next one.

Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao!

Guess what? Miss Chue has some unique and very special products to introduce to you!

Behold! The tools Miss Chue used to land her husband! I’ve included plenty of illustrations so that you can see exactly how they—

Oh, it was just a catalog. Maomao tore it up and flung it in the brazier without finishing it.

Little Sister:

It's all well and good for me to take in Master Hao's daughter on the Moon Prince's orders, but to discover that you're caught up in the matter... Such a pretty young thing, it's a shame. She's not enough to bring a country to its knees, but with her family background and a minimum of training in etiquette she could have at least made middle consort.

Zhizi is some twenty-four centimeters shorter than average for her age, and although her weight is evidently increasing steadily, it's still not enough.

As to her language development, it seems she didn't have sufficient contact with the outside world. No matter how sheltered a young lady might be, I would expect her to have greater facility with words if her mother and nursemaid and the like had actually engaged with her.

Ha ha ha—I gather that her mother treated her like a doll or a pet. A most unpleasant business, I must say. If a child isn't properly brought up, they're no different from an animal!

I know all about Master Hao. The other day I heard a rumor that he had incurred the Emperor's displeasure, and I guess it must be true. I could absolutely see it, from him. He may be family to the Empress Dowager, but there are limits. Such a waste, with that youthful beauty he has.

Oh! I hear his three sons inherited his looks—they might be very suitable for adoption. Their personalities do not *take after their father's; they're helpful lads but not too eager to make names for themselves.*

That's what rumor says, anyway...but as I've learned to my detriment, one must investigate for oneself, and not believe everything one hears.

Master Hao's third son makes fairly frequent visits to our estate to check on his sister. He brings her milk every time. She always seems perfectly happy to see him—she almost acts like a dog wagging its tail.

He tells me how clever the girl is and clearly thinks the world of her, but he's obviously biased. His eyes are clouded. I'd like to tell him that if she's so great, he should have given her proper nutrition and education in the first place, but then again, it is not beautiful to comment on another household's domestic matters. My own house must look rather, ahem,

objectionable to an outside observer.

I was trying to tell him as politely as I could that I didn't want him stopping by too often when that brother of mine showed up with his vegetables and started handing them out, and then Master Hao's boy gave him some milk in return, and then it was "Let me show you what I learned in the western capital" and they started making butter together... Having my brother around is convenient in a great many ways, but if he breaks ground on one more field here I'm going to scream.

Further, Maomao, I might draw attention to how much I am personally suffering on account of a situation involving yourself. As such, perhaps you could entertain one little request. Word is that you have some sort of connection with a wheat farmer, and can obtain wheat at a discount. Could you introduce me?

Why, you ask? Ahem! Things happened, and a ship full of wheat sank.

All I need is a simple letter of introduction, and I'll consider us square in the matter of Zhizi.

Your brother,
Lahan

Maomao didn't waste a minute drafting her reply.

Lahan:
NO.

Maomao

Ah, Maomao,

Are you eating properly? I'm sure you have the same question about me. Don't worry, I am.

Not only do I get three square meals a day, but Guen always has snacks for me. I swear it's a mystery how he gets his hands on all those different treats. Being a medical officer, I'm sure he's not allowed to just pop out of the rear palace whenever he wants. I simply can't imagine.

All right, enough preamble. I don't doubt Liu has already warned you,

but you are not to even think of trying to go to that village, not on your life! You've never had smallpox—and I trust you understand what that means, don't you?

Lao is as Lao does, but his medical skills are no less polished than Liu's, and his commitment to the cause is unquestionable. You can leave things in his hands.

If you were ever to get smallpox, I would feel compelled to take it upon myself to nurse you back to health—and that would certainly mean I would get smallpox as well.

One other thing: I gather that Master Hao's daughter is at the estate on the Moon Prince's orders, but the most I can offer is about one visit every couple of weeks. The original discussion was that I could commute between the rear palace and the estate, but I'm afraid now's not the time. I simply can't leave Guen by himself. You must pardon me.

Yours,
Luomen

It was true: The means by which the quack doctor came into possession of his snacks remained mysterious. He was a medical officer of the rear palace, and he hardly ever left the place. Yet he seemed to have an infinite supply of edible goodies. It was a riddle—but not one that there was any particular need to solve, so Maomao let it go.

As to the reason that Luomen couldn't readily leave the rear palace, it probably had less to do with pregnancies among the consorts and more with infighting among them—specifically, trying to prevent such strife. It was all too possible that some of the consorts might try to poison each other, and if anything should happen, the quack would quickly be in over his head.

Don't give my old man more work to do!

Maomao huffed and picked up the next letter.

It didn't say anything.

There was nothing written there. It was just a high-quality sheet of paper, albeit not perfumed. The letter came with a wooden box, inside of which were some quality tea leaves. Tea wasn't just a luxury item—it could

have medicinal properties as well.

He doesn't have to beat around the bush with me...

It was so very Jinshi-esque to send something that could either be enjoyed for its own sake or used as a medicine. The reason there was no text in the letter was probably to avoid prying eyes. He couldn't exactly write about day-to-day life, so he probably figured that there'd be no point in the elaborate seasonal greetings that prefaced the average official missive.

Maomao picked up a piece of paper and began to write a letter of her own.

"*I got a letter from a man named Kokuyou*," it began. She then offered a quick summary of the contents of Kokuyou's message. Jinshi might not be able to give any written details of the work he was doing, but Maomao had some nice, innocuous subjects she could choose from.

She also indicated a desire to go to Red Plum Village. Finally, she didn't address the letter; she knew she could just give it to Chue or somebody.

She couldn't help feeling, though, that the letter was a little bit sad as it stood. She couldn't think of anything else to say, so she dipped her fingers in the ink and pressed them to the edge of the paper. It left one large circle and four smaller ones, a simple impression of a paw.

The next letter smelled faintly of medicine.

Hey, Maomao,

Come on. Kokuyou must be coming back soon, right?

Right? Right?! He'll be back before the new year, right?!

I'm just such a ball of nerves without him. If you want to know how bad I am, well, I'm so downhearted that the ladies of the Verdigris House come by to try to comfort me!

Listen up: If Kokuyou is coming back, let me know right away.

Also, I'm including another letter that came for you. I guess it's from some girl who always gives her letters to the guard at the gate of the pleasure district.

Keep in touch—please!

Sazen

Just as he said, there was another letter. Unscented and written on fairly crude paper, the handwriting was rough but careful.

Dear Maomao,

It has gotten cold, hasn't it? I am doing my very best here.

Hee hee hee! Guess what—there are plenty of people who would be perfectly happy to marry someone just like me!

When I say that I worked in the rear palace, I always get a reaction. I guess the rear palace was actually a pretty awesome place.

I would like to visit the Verdigris House once in my life if I could, but with my salary I would have to save for years and years.

Maomao, you are a celebrity in the pleasure district. All I could do was give this letter to the guard, but when I mentioned your name, he said "Oh," and knew exactly who I meant. I hope this reaches you safely.

Okay then! If I can get some more nice paper I will send you another letter.

Sincerely,
Xiaolan

"Dammit, you need to include *your* address! How am I supposed to write back?" Maomao groused. Then again, she couldn't help wondering what Xiaolan's current employer would think if they discovered she was corresponding with a brothel.

Maomao heaved a sigh and put the note in her letter box.

Chapter 16: Peerless Changsha

Exactly as Kokuyou had promised in his letter, he and Yo returned to the capital for a visit.

“Sorry for the trouble,” Yo said.

“Good to be back!” Kokuyou exclaimed.

Things really are hard on her, Maomao realized when she saw how thin Yo had gotten in just a single month. She was frankly amazed that a girl still in her late teens had survived even that long.

“I could have kept going,” Yo said.

Yes, she probably could have. But then what?

“I believe you,” Maomao said. “But it would’ve taken you past the point of no return.”

“She’s right! That’s a big, fat *no!*” said Kokuyou. They were at the medical office to make a report, but Maomao wished Yo would hurry up and get some rest.

“I’m going to go give our written report to Dr. Liu. Maomao, if you could look after the doctor?” Yo asked.

“Sure.”

“Ha ha ha ha! What am I, a little kid?”

Kid or no, Maomao made tea for Kokuyou. He looked like she could have offered him swamp water and he would have drunk it down with a smile, but for his sake she got out the slightly nice tea leaves. She figured he had earned it. And to go with the drink, a potato.

“You look like you’ve got plenty of vim left,” she remarked.

“Oh, yeah, I’m feeling great!”

“Well, nice. Now tell me about the thing about cows and horses that you wrote about in your letter.”

As Kokuyou had requested, Maomao had considered places with said livestock. Hao’s household was home to some cows, but Red Plum Village, where Lishu worked, was probably a better bet.

“I’ve made some inquiries,” she said. She had visited Red Plum Village

before, after all, and when she'd asked, Chue had agreed to arrange things. The only catch was that she'd had a nasty little grin on her face when she'd said it, and Maomao had to wonder if she was plotting something.

"I'll be going with you. That all right?"

"Sure, fine!" Kokuyou said, taking in the aroma of the tea in a couple of great sniffs. "But in exchange, I've got a favor to ask."

"What is it?" Maomao said, fully intending to oblige so long as it wasn't something, like, crazy.

"Could you get Yo a breather?" Kokuyou asked, looking like a child making an extra-special request.

What would pass for a breather? For Maomao that would be mixing medicines or collecting herbs, but Yo probably would prefer something else. But what?

"Ah! That, I believe, would be a drinking party," drawled that peerless purveyor of information, Chue. Alcohol! That was one of Maomao's specialties. *Bring it on!* she thought, but Chue waved a finger at her in warning. "Having to go head-to-head at the table with you would be cruel and unusual punishment for poor Yo," she said.

"Cruel and unusual?"

Putting it that way, now *that* was cruel.

"The kind of drinking party we have in mind here, you see..." Chue began, and they were off.

Thus it was that Maomao found herself with the others at a restaurant near the dormitory. "The others" included Yo, Changsha, Yao, En'en, and Chue.

"G-Gee, this place looks pretty posh..."

Yo and Changsha were somewhat ill at ease as they were led to the group's private room.

"The price is a lot more commoner-esque than it looks!" Chue chirped. "Plus, we can have way more fun by starting out in a private room than by waiting for some weirdo customer to invite himself to our table. The point is, today you can eat your fill and enjoy!"

"Why are you even here, Miss Chue?"

Chue pretended to weep at Maomao's unpardonably brusque question. "Waaah! Why shouldn't I be? It was Miss Chue's idea!"

"But you're not a medical assistant," Maomao said flatly.

“Aww, pay Miss Chue no mind! Everyone here knows her, and anyway, renting a private room costs money, right? The more ways we split it, the smaller the bill for each of us!”

“You’re not wrong, but I’m betting you’re going to eat the most out of any of us...”

If things really went sideways, Chue might eat more than the other five of them combined. No matter how Maomao cut it, everyone else would end up paying the price, literally.

“Hoo hoo hoo! Hoo hoo hoo hoo! What’s so wrong with that, Miss Maomao? It’s thanks to Miss Chue that you were able to get a restaurant that could accommodate everyone’s needs on next to no notice, remember.”

“That’s true...”

The place had a private room available, and it wasn’t too far from the dorms. The unassuming facade had deterred Maomao from ever going inside. She was surprised and impressed to discover what a fine place it really was.

Changsha went around the table pouring tea. Maomao would personally have preferred alcohol, but with Yao’s damaged liver and kidneys, it was better to abstain, and Yo still wasn’t back to full strength. Changsha could probably match Maomao drink for drink, she suspected, but given that she was the one pouring the tea, it didn’t look like she was in the mood to imbibe. Well, Maomao could read a room—and go along with a group.

And here I was hoping to recoup my investment...in liquid form.

Maomao didn’t have it in her to be quite as brazen as Chue.

“All righty, everyone, let’s eat and be merry!” Chue snatched the food from a server who had come into the room and placed it smack in the middle of the table. There was a bamboo steamer full of dumplings with translucent skin, as well as a soup with fluffy egg floating in it. The soup had only a mild salty flavor—it was up to each diner to use the spices and flavorings at the table to tweak it to their own taste. That made it the perfect thing for Yao.

Yao, though, turned to Yo, who hadn’t even picked up her chopsticks. “Aren’t you going to eat? It tastes really good.”

“I-I believe you. But I keep thinking, should I really be here enjoying this luxurious meal when Dr. Lao and the others are still hard at work?”

Yo wasn’t very good at switching between the professional and the

personal.

“Yo—” Maomao began, but she was interrupted by a most unexpected person.

“Miss Yo,” En’en broke in. “If you let that leave you high-strung every minute of every day, eventually you’re going to snap like a string!” She hustled some food onto a plate and placed it in front of the other girl. “The human body has some capacity for self-healing, but there are limits. They sent you home out of consideration for your needs, because it was better that you get a little rest and come back ready to go again than that you destroy yourself from strain. So it’s important to take this time to get your strength back.”

“B-But...”

“You’re doing a job that none of the rest of us can do. Who do you think will replace you if you keel over?”

Listen to her, talking sense!

For a moment Maomao was taken aback, but really, En’en was a sensible person. She could be very reasonable so long as the topic didn’t involve Yao. Maomao wished she would work on attenuating that fixation a bit—En’en might owe Yao a lot, but her obsession was a little much.

“She’s right. You have to prioritize your health,” Changsha agreed.

“You really think it’s all right for me to be eating delicious food and enjoying myself?”

“I can tell you one thing: Dr. Liu doesn’t like to crush his physicians under their workload. I’m sure the same is true of us ladies,” Yao informed her. “Yes, he’ll cut you loose in a heartbeat if he thinks you aren’t useful, but the very fact that they’re giving you this break means that they *do* see some purpose in you. If anything, I think you should be proud of that.”

Maomao crossed her arms with a *wow, even Yao’s matured* look on her face, which earned her a glare from En’en.

“I know your heart might not be in it, Yo, but you have to eat and get your strength back,” Changsha said. “Frankly, if you don’t eat something, you’ll never feel better, and then they’ll never let you go back to the village. Of course, if you don’t actually *want* to go back, you could just make sure you stay haggard and thin so that the physicians never send you out again.”

She was awfully tough with Yo, nothing like the way she spoke to Maomao and the others. Partly, that was just the way it was when you were

peers—but in any case, she obviously felt closer to Yo than to the rest of them.

Yo spent a second pouting, but then she heaved a sigh and reached for her plate.

“Ah! Lovely! Just a second now, Miss Chue will make sure everyone gets a fair share!” Chue swept up the communal plate and spun it around with her fingers, so deftly that you would never have guessed she couldn’t use her right hand. The left hand worked overtime, while she used the part of her right arm above the elbow—the part that wasn’t paralyzed—to assist it.

“I don’t think we need you to dole it out,” Yao said, reaching with her own chopsticks. En’en was visibly fidgeting; *she* wanted to be the one to offer Yao her portion.

“Oh, but I do! It’s all well and good for you and your friends to get your own food, Miss Yao, but don’t forget that there’s an unspoken understanding that your junior colleagues can only touch the food that their seniors have started in on. In a free-for-all, that would be fine and dandy, but there’s no alcohol here. So! Miss Chue will give everyone a little bit of everything, and then whoever wants seconds of something can go at it, *mou mantai*—no problem!”

“There’s a few things here I’m not sure I *can* eat, actually,” said Yao, who went out of her way to avoid foods that were too salty or spicy. She was eyeing several dishes that looked especially rich.

“You can just give your portions to Miss Chue, then! She’ll make sure they disappear without a trace!”

“Are we sure? Shouldn’t we leave some?” Yao asked. Among the upper classes, there was a custom of leaving leftovers at the table for the servants to eat.

In any case, since the food had been handed out, everyone dug in. This dinner was also a chance to chat and share, so they talked while they ate. For the duration of the meal, nobody uttered the word *manners*.

“I’m sorry to bring this up while you’re supposed to be recovering, Yo, but could you tell us about the quarantined village?” Maomao asked. It was a subject that could have cost anyone their appetite, but Yo was very forthcoming.

“Sure. I have to say, the situation is pretty bleak. But it’s still lots better

than what happened in *my* village.”

Yo’s village had been annihilated by smallpox.

“How many cases are there?”

“The population is about three hundred people, and maybe sixty percent of them are totally isolated. There have been a few deaths as well. We’re gradually recruiting people we think are fully recovered to help, but the contamination is still spreading quickly.”

Yo sounded calm enough, but the faces around her were pale. Chue’s face specifically was being stuffed with food, so Maomao didn’t feel bad about popping a dumpling into her own mouth.

“So do the physicians simply hope to wait out the infection there in the village?” Yao asked.

“Yes. Except... We’ve already had several people plan to escape, and one who succeeded.”

“Are things going to be okay?” Changsha asked. She was as white as the rest of them, but her chopsticks still crept toward the vegetable stir-fry.

“We caught the runner pretty quickly. And when he ran, we put everyone who had been in contact with the patients in temporary quarantine, so we think it turned out all right.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Maomao agreed, but something nagged at her. “From what you’re saying, it sounds like it’s an easy settlement to quarantine. Which presumably means that it’s relatively remote from other villages or towns—that it doesn’t have much interaction with other places, right?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Then where did the outbreak start?”

Maomao wasn’t attacking anyone with this question. She simply wanted to know the origin of the disease.

“I’m afraid we don’t know. In fact, at first, only little kids were showing signs of infection, so they thought it might be chickenpox. But then the adults started getting sick, and that’s when they realized something might be wrong and tried to find a doctor.”

“Do merchants ever visit this village?”

“There were several groups, but none of them showed signs of smallpox. The very first patient had gone to a nearby city with his parents, so there’s some speculation that he might have gotten it then.”

It still wasn’t adding up to Maomao. “This all sounds very strange,” she said.

“Yes, very strange,” Changsha agreed.

“What’s strange?” Chue asked as she poured a generous helping of vinegar into her congee.

“Suppose this kid did catch the disease in the city. Is smallpox running rampant there too?” Maomao asked.

“No,” replied Yo.

There was a natural question, one that Yao and the others seemed to share with Maomao. “So where did it come from?”

Maomao didn’t have a detailed knowledge of the origins of disease. But she knew it was thought that a sort of subtle “poison” could enter the body and thereby cause illness.

“I’m assuming you can’t get the story from that first kid who got infected?”

“He died,” Yo said slowly.

Maomao put a hand to her forehead. With her free hand, she spooned some egg out of her soup—but it was so mildly seasoned that it hardly tasted like anything.

“What if the nearby city was the source of the infection? What a scary thought,” Yao said.

“For sure,” Yo agreed. “It would defeat the whole point of quarantining this village.”

“Hold on... What if the city did have infected people? But suppose either their smallpox got better, or they died, without it ever rising to the level of an outbreak. Then basically there’s no problem, right?”

Yao was right, but she was missing one thing.

“Smallpox can spread even from dead bodies,” Maomao said.

“That’s right, it remains infectious for quite a long time,” Yo added. “Ideally, you want to burn the bodies, not bury them. Their clothing can be dangerous, as well, if there’s any blood or skin left on it, so you have to be careful to disinfect it.”

“Really?”

Yes, really. Yao didn’t know much about the specifics of smallpox. Which was fair enough; an assistant to the medical office had enough to remember already. And she wasn’t alone. En’en and Changsha looked like

this was news to them as well.

“So let’s sum up! Suppose whoever gave the kid smallpox in the city dies without anybody the wiser, but then someone finds them. Sounds like it could turn pretty unpleasant!” Chue drawled.

“Well, it’s one possibility,” Maomao said.

That was a worst-case scenario, but there were priorities in a situation like this. Searching for a dead body that might or might not even exist was not at the top of them.

They needed to think of other ways to solve this problem.

“Did Kokuyou have anything to say?” Maomao asked, an image of the easygoing man flitting through her mind.

“Yes. It sounds like the doctors have come up with some way to prevent the spread.”

“He had some kind of interest in livestock,” Maomao ventured.

“That’s right. I think he was investigating ‘cow smallpox.’”

Maomao’s eyes went wide at “Cow smallpox?!”

She suddenly found it very pressing—absolutely essential—that she join Kokuyou in this endeavor. She clenched a fist, triumphant to know that she had already asked Jinshi in her letter that she be allowed to go to Red Plum Village.

“The doctors seem to believe that it will give them some sense of how to prevent the disease,” Yo said.

“J-Just a second! I don’t think Kokuyou mentioned that before! Didn’t he claim it wasn’t in his mentor’s notes or whatever?” Maomao asked, wheeling on Yo. Getting uncomfortably close, in fact. So close that Chue popped herself between them with a “Whoa, there!”

“What are you talking about?” Maomao asked.

“I don’t think the doctors are actually very confident about this...but it’s possible that if you give someone cow smallpox, it might allow them to develop some resistance to the disease while suffering fewer symptoms than with the human version.”

“Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s find some cattle!” Maomao couldn’t wait. She was ready to make for Red Plum Village right that moment.

“Hold on, Maomao,” En’en said.

“Just wait one little second, Miss Maomao!” said Chue at the same time.

They both grabbed an arm before Maomao could go charging off.

“Maomao... They say that even if you catch cow smallpox, sometimes you can still get the human kind,” Yo said with a shake of her head. It wasn’t an exact science.

Maomao stopped. “Then there’s no point, is there?”

“I know, I know. Sometimes it confers resistance to smallpox, and sometimes it doesn’t. It’s probably because it’s a similar disease, but not the exact same one.”

“That’s a pretty serious gamble.”

You could give yourself cow smallpox, but until you actually encountered the human variety, you wouldn’t know if it had worked.

And I would have tried it, if it hadn’t been for that letter from Pops.

Maomao bit her lip, hard. She couldn’t experiment with smallpox if it meant putting that kind of burden on Luomen. Leave it to him to see where her mind would go and stop her before she got there.

“All right! The vibe has gotten a little weird here, but let’s reset—the star of the show has just arrived!” Chue made a *da-da-daaaah* and ushered in a server carrying a platter of whole roast duck. The big, fat bird glistened invitingly.

“Miss Chue,” Maomao said. “You didn’t bring this duck from *home*, did you?”

“No, sadly! I only wish I could have!”

Maomao was relieved to know that she wouldn’t be eating Basen’s beloved friend.

There was, as we’ve established, no alcohol at this feast, but one could almost, as the saying goes, get drunk on the atmosphere. The talk grew more and more no-holds-barred as the night went on.

It was Changsha who finally confronted Yao and En’en. “I can’t believe you two! You understand perfectly well in your heads, but you let your *hearts* lead the way!”

Everyone else has been dying *to say that!* Maomao thought.

Yao listened quietly—ordinarily she would have been feistier about it, but recently she had matured a little bit. En’en was practically frothing at the mouth, but Yao held her back, so there was nothing she could do as Changsha went on, her momentum building.

It would be one thing if it were an older person telling them off...

Changsha, however, was the youngest person in the room. And that

young lady carried on upbraiding them.

“You want to know what I think? I think En’en has been such an enabler to you, Yao, that that’s why you’re in limbo now! How old are you? Seventeen? You’re an adult woman! I don’t care if you are living at Maomao’s family’s house—”

“They’re not my family,” Maomao piped up, as usual. That one thing, she wanted to be very clear about.

“Just forget about that for now, Maomao. The point is, you *must* know there’s something wrong with them living at that house forever! Whatever you think of him, there’s an unmarried man of their own age there. And yes, I know it’s a big estate, but so what? Are they going to stay there for years?”

“You’re absolutely right. I agree completely,” En’en said. Which was all well and good, but Changsha’s expression only darkened.

“Yet you haven’t done anything about it, and that’s my point. That’s why even though everyone thinks it’s weird, Yao can’t make up her mind and just hangs around forever with Maomao’s family. I think Yao is more sensible than she looks, and if you would lay down the law with her, she wouldn’t have done this. I know you’ve dropped roundabout hints about leaving, but you haven’t actually *said* it. This—Master Lahan, is it? You haven’t told her what a bad plan it is for her to stick around just because she can’t get over him!”

Yao and En’en both froze. Yo was giving Changsha a mystified look, while Chue slapped her forehead and groaned.

Maomao pondered to what she could compare the atmosphere in the room at that moment. Suppose it was like a side dish made in summer, then set aside for later and forgotten for days in a corner of the room. Yes, it was like that: the special way everything froze at the moment you opened the lid of that stewpot.

Yao’s lips trembled and she slowly went red in the face. En’en looked like a devil incarnate.

I think I’ll sit this one out.

The only measure Maomao took was to order another drink.

Chue continued to munch on her food, while Yo’s eyes began to shimmer as it dawned on her that they were talking about *love*.

“Lady Yao! Needs! A better man!” En’en exclaimed.

“I knew a woman like you, En’en. She said the same sort of things and never had anything to do with the male sex,” Changsha replied. “It was my great-aunt, and she spent her whole life unmarried. In her final moments, her very last words were that if my great-grandfather was in paradise, she would drag him down to hell herself. And then she died! Is that how you want Yao to feel about you, En’en?”

“W-Well, I...”

“Yao. I think you realize very well by now that it’s time to change how you approach Master Lahan. Yes, yes. You *just don’t know* if what you feel for Master Lahan is true love or mere curiosity. Believe me, I understand. Let’s set that aside for the moment. Forget about how unpleasant you might make things for him. This reflects badly on you and En’en. And it impacts your work too.”

That was the way to get Yao’s attention. “How does it impact my work?” she said.

Smooth move, Changsha.

For better or worse, she had a conversational agility born of having been raised in a commoner household. This was a subject Maomao would have avoided for fear of treading where she shouldn’t. The willingness to go for the jugular, though, must have come from being raised in an environment that basically looked on the bright side even if there were occasional problems. There was no question in Maomao’s mind that Changsha’s house had been a friendly place.

In the future, that attitude would probably land her in hot water with the physicians once in a while, but here at least it was proving useful.

“How do you want Master Lahan to see you, Yao?” Changsha asked.

“I’m...not sure what you mean.”

“Do you want him to fawn over your exquisite beauty?”

“Hell no! That would be such a pain in the neck!”

“Would it, though?” Chue muttered. Maomao agreed with her. Yao had an attractive face and an ample body. In other words, she had problems known only to those young women who were popular with all the boys. Not a subject that had much to do with Maomao and Chue.

I guess Jinshi has more problems than anyone that way.

Maomao sipped on the tea the server brought her.

“So you want him to see that you’re someone who’s good at her job,

then.”

“W-Well, yes,” Yao said, but she didn’t sound terribly convincing.

En’en was giving Changsha a pouty glower, as she had been throughout the conversation.

“What if you went back to your family home, then?”

“And why would I do that?”

“If you want to show that you can work, it should be as more than just a palace lady. Don’t you think you should demonstrate that you understand domestic matters?”

“She’s so right,” Chue said, snatching up the last of the cubed simmered pork. Then she ordered more food for good measure. “Your uncle is still in the western capital, isn’t he, Yao?”

“Yes...”

By this point, we need make no smart remarks about how Chue was somehow well-versed in the matters of Yao’s family.

“This would be the perfect time then, wouldn’t it? Seize the reins of your house while Uncle’s away!”

This conversation just took an unsettling turn, Maomao thought.

Chue continued to mop up various leftovers as she spoke. “Who’s looking after things while your uncle isn’t there?” she drawled.

“That would be my mother.”

“She must be very clever with household matters, then.”

“I’m not sure I’d say that,” Yao replied. There was an element of her inferiority complex that came from the fact that her mother couldn’t get along on her own.

“Then you should take over for her! Or are your hands so full with helping the doctors that you can’t possibly do anything else?” Chue taunted her. Much as Maomao liked to think that she and Chue were on friendly terms, Chue could appear awfully unpleasant when she was needling someone.

Is this even, you know, safe?

Maomao had grave doubts. Pushing Yao further and further might simply result in her working too hard and breaking down. It was the same threat that had hung over Yo’s head in her haste to go back to the smallpox infection zone.

Chue, however, was not going to let up. Maomao, assuming she had a

plan, chose not to say anything. Yo looked like she wanted to speak up, but Maomao discreetly stopped her.

“I think it would be a great idea to go back to your family home,” Changsha said. “I mean, you’re hardly cut out to live on your own even if you did leave Master Lahan’s place. I think it would be better to be with your family while you worked. You’d have servants to take care of chores around the house, right?”

“Now just a minute, Changsha,” said En’en, pale as a sheet.

“Yes, En’en? What is it?”

“Did you just say *live on your own*?”

“I did.”

En’en’s face contorted.

“Am I wrong? If she wants to learn to do real work, she can’t have you cooking and doing her laundry for her forever, can she? She needs to learn to get along by herself, but she doesn’t strike me as knowing very much about housework. Sure, she can wash bandages, but I’ll bet she can’t iron a set of clothes. So I think she should just give up the whole idea and go back home.”

“Where if I’m not the one doing those chores, someone else will be! So is there really a problem with me doing it?”

“You bet there is. The two of you share the same workplace, right? But once you get home, Yao doesn’t have anything to do—you just take care of everything for her. Which means no matter how amazingly well she does at *work*-work, you’ll always seem so much better than her. Conclusion: As long as you’re around, no one will ever have an admiring word for Yao.”

An invisible arrow struck En’en through the heart. Changsha, Maomao reflected, was truly frightening.

“If she’ll never be better at housework than you are, then I think going back to take over the family in her uncle’s place would make her look much more like someone who can handle herself. Keeping a household running is at least a *kind* of housework.”

“But... But...” En’en looked desperately at Yao, but her mistress appeared thunderstruck.

“You’re right... I’ve let myself be coddled,” she said. “And when housework *is* real work. I felt like I could do anything...when I couldn’t even do that.”

Yao was feeling very earnest today. Changsha launched another salvo at her newly malleable senior. “So you’ll proceed on the assumption that you’re going back home?”

“I will. Changsha, are there any other flaws you see in me?”

“If you’re asking, then I suppose,” she said ominously.

“Tell me.”

“Certainly. I think you need to spell out exactly what your feelings are for Master Lahan.”

Yo’s eyes brightened again. Clearly, there was no tonic for her spirits like a good love chat.

“Tell me everything about him that you love—and everything you don’t.”

“Er... Well... That’s very sudden...”

“It’s very important, is what it is. We need to see once and for all if this is true love or something else entirely!”

En’en was so desperate to stop the conversation that she looked like she might expire on the spot.

Gah! Changsha scary lady!

“Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao!” Chue whispered.

“What is it, Miss Chue?”

“Please don’t jump into a love conversation, Miss Maomao. It could cause all kinds of trouble!”

There was a beat. “I know,” Maomao answered. She was very interested in *not* provoking Changsha to interrogate her.

Chapter 17: The Jade Elder (Part One)

The morning after the medical assistants' private feast, Maomao felt something heavy on her belly. Chue was resting against it, while Yo was curled up on a bed roll in a corner of the room.

"Ahem," Maomao said, trying to remember what had happened the night before. She hadn't had any alcohol, but the atmosphere had made it *feel* as if she had. Chue had been exactly right: It had been a good idea to pick a restaurant close to the dormitory. They'd eaten late into the night, and by the time they left, it would have been impossible to get a carriage.

Chue had sent a messenger to say that Yao, En'en, and Yo would be staying at the dormitory.

Yao and En'en were sleeping in Changsha's room—in order to continue their love chat from hell.

"Miss Chue, Miss Chue, wake up," Maomao said, shaking her.

"Noooo, hubby! Not theeere!" Still asleep, Chue puckered her lips and started leaning toward Maomao, who reflexively smacked her on the head.

"Oh! Miss Maomao."

"Wake *up*, please, Miss Chue. It's morning."

Maomao clambered off the bed and pulled on an overrobe. She flung open the window and let cold air flood the room.

"Okay, today's schedule," she said. She and Yo were off duty. Yo was actually off for the next several days; she'd only come in yesterday to make a report. The three in Changsha's room were all working today. Maomao assumed En'en would have things under control, but she went to check nonetheless.

"...very sorry, Lady Yao. I'll get us ready to go to work right away," En'en was saying.

"I'm telling you, it's a mistake for you to do that!" Changsha snapped.

"En'en, I can get ready by myself," said Yao.

It sounded like the home truths of the previous night were taking effect. Maomao put her hands together as if in prayer and decided to pretend she

hadn’t heard anything. A rather twisted ecosystem had developed, she thought.

She was going back to her room when she heard a commotion outside.

What’s going on?

Without much thought, Maomao changed course for the front door. She found a familiar face standing there.

“Men are *not allowed* in here!” shrieked the auntie who ran the dormitory.

“I’m not a man,” replied the visitor.

So saying, believe it or not, she opened her top to reveal her chest. Two hills appeared, neither too large nor too small. The auntie blinked like a pigeon hit with a peashooter.

“Ah, Lady Maomao,” the visitor said.

“Miss Sanfan,” Maomao replied after a moment.

“Please, just call me Sanfan.”

So she was their mysterious visitor: a woman who worked at the freak strategist’s house.

“Y-You know this person? Well, she’s your problem now,” the auntie said.

“No, I—” Maomao started, but the other woman was already gone. Resigned, she turned to Sanfan.

“I’ve come to fetch you, Lady Maomao.”

“Why?”

“Because Master Lahan is in danger!”

Maomao didn’t say anything. She was about to simply ignore the whole thing—what did she care, after all?—when Sanfan hissed in her ear, “If you say no, I’ll make a scene. You want that?”

Whatever floats your boat.

“I gather that Lady Yao and Lady En’en are here.” So the house had gotten the message that they were staying out for the night. “I told Master Lahan that the two of them were staying out for the night and seemed to be having a lovely time.”

She sounded positively malicious, but it wasn’t untrue. Maomao tried to force her still sleep-addled brain to function. Sanfan had come here because of some danger to Lahan. Maomao suspected the young woman wasn’t so interested in getting any help from Maomao herself as she was in the

borrowed terror of the freak strategist, who would raise hell if anything happened to Maomao.

What could possibly be going on?

Knowing Lahan and his penchant for calculation, he wouldn't fail in a business venture without a fight. But then she thought of his letter from the other day.

He said a ship sank or something.

"You want wheat?" Maomao asked. That was what he had written—something about selling wheat at a discount.

"Yes. But I fear it may already be too late."

"Too late?"

"They took Master Lahan away not long ago."

"If that's a joke, even I don't think it's funny. But if it's true, wouldn't it be quicker to ask his adoptive father for help?"

"He's playing Go with the Go Sage, and I was sent away with brusque orders that I was not to interfere with their game."

No wonder Sanfan was ready to do just about anything. She was taking a deep breath—if Maomao didn't go along with her, she really would scream and shout until Yao and En'en heard what was going on. En'en might be more than happy to let Lahan suffer, but Yao certainly would not. At the same time, it would mean that all Changsha's diligent work in convincing Yao to be her own woman would be in vain.

Maomao saw the writing on the wall. "Very well," she said. She left a message for Chue with the dorm auntie, then let Sanfan lead her away.

As they went, Maomao asked Sanfan who it was who had absconded with Lahan.

"We're dealing with a man known as the Jade Elder," she said.

As the name implied, he was an old man who always wore jade jewelry—a merchant famous throughout not only the capital, but the entire country of Li. When it came to commerce it was said he could outdo even the Gyoku clan of the western capital.

That's a big deal, Maomao thought.

"Those ships that sank recently belonged to the Jade Elder. He's trying to pin responsibility for them on Master Lahan."

"That doesn't make sense. Lahan would be the victim in that scenario.

The ship's owner should be the one who absorbs the loss."

"He's claiming that the cause of the sinking was that Master Lahan tried to cram more grain into the hold than they had agreed on because of his own greed."

"That's an excuse if I ever heard one."

Lahan could be a wicked schemer, but when it came to numbers, he was unimpeachable. He wouldn't do something like that just to squeeze a few extra pennies out.

"What about the Jade Elder? Is he the kind of person greedy enough to pull something like that?" Maomao asked. As the Jade Elder wasn't a patron of the Verdigris House, she didn't know much about him.

"Do you think Master Lahan would associate with him if he were? At the very least, Master Lahan must have believed he could trust this man to deal in good faith."

Guess his glasses got foggy.

Maomao admitted that Lahan was generally a good judge of character, but these things could happen.

They arrived at a location on the southern side of the capital. The city's construction was simple: The palace precincts were in the north, while everyone else lived to the south—and the farther south you went, the more common the populace became. The pleasure district was located at the southernmost end of the city and surrounded by slums.

As such, it would have been dangerous for Maomao and Sanfan to go there alone; they had a bodyguard with them. He was in his mid-thirties and seemed strong enough, but he had a dead look in his eyes. When Maomao heard Sanfan call him Erfan, *number two*, it jogged her memory. He had been at the meeting of the named protecting the freak strategist.

I'm sure he'll be a perfectly capable guard for us, but...hrm.

The toils of serving the freak strategist seemed to have taken all the life out of him, which left Maomao a bit uneasy.

"He lives in a rough place for a rich guy," Maomao remarked. They were heading toward a house that was impressively large, but all the guards outside made it look like a gambling den.

"A truly prosperous merchant needs to be able to keep some things in the shadows," Sanfan replied. Meaning, he would have no mercy on those who defied him.

In a ringing tone she announced to the guards, “We are here to retrieve Master Lahan.” The guards made a show of holding a whispered conference, then laughed at her.

I don’t like this at all.

Truthfully, this was not the kind of situation where Maomao excelled. She was accustomed to places like the proverbial “garden of women,” environments that were more about hard talk than open violence. She wanted to stay well clear of places where someone might strike you dead with a single punch. Her body was not very sturdy. Then again, in I-sei Province she’d been chased all over a bandit hideout by several of its occupants. Compared to that, this was a walk in the park. She could at least comfortably *look* calm.

“Haven’t you heard anything from your boss?” Sanfan asked.

“Naw, not a word.”

“Oh, I see.” She took a deep breath.

“Pardon me,” Erfan said, and covered Maomao’s ears.

The next moment, Sanfan bellowed, “*I’m here to retrieve my master!*” She shouted so loud Maomao thought her eardrums might burst. If Erfan hadn’t covered her ears, she worried the noise might have scrambled her brains. Sanfan sounded nothing like her usual reserved self. Her tremendous yell overpowered the guards.

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!” they said, covering their own ears.

“You won’t let me through, so I have to speak directly to your boss. Loud enough that he can hear me.”

“Why, you—!” The guards drew their weapons, but Sanfan remained imperious.

No, wait...

Maomao realized she could detect the smell of sweat from the other woman. The smelly kind that came out when you were especially nervous. Sanfan was afraid, but she was putting on a brave face.

It showed that she really, genuinely was concerned for Lahan.

A blade stopped inches from Sanfan’s nose. Beside Maomao, a light had come into Erfan’s formerly dead eyes, and he was watching like a hawk to see what the guards would do.

“Hey! What the hell is going on out here?!” demanded some more men

who emerged from inside.

“Th-They say they’re here for the guy we brought in,” answered a guard.

The newcomers looked substantially more sensible than the roughnecks at the gate; when they heard what he said, he ate a knuckle sandwich.

“Do forgive us,” one of them said. “We apologize for making a visitor wait outside.”

“Not at all. Perhaps you could take me directly to my master?” Sanfan replied. She was referring to Lahan, but it sounded unfortunately like she meant something other than what she was really saying. After all, the same word could mean *husband*. “I apologize for startling you, Lady Maomao.”

“It’s all right. That really was some shout, though.”

“Ah, yes. I learned to sing at a young age, so I’ve always been confident in my sheer volume.”

Maomao saw that she had really dodged a bullet by not causing Sanfan to scream at the dormitory.

“This way, please,” the man said, and showed Maomao and the others to a guest room. Lahan was there, looking very, very pale.

“Master Lahan!” Sanfan exclaimed. She tried to go to him, but was prevented.

“Ha ha ha ha... Sanfan... How good of you to come,” Lahan said in a trembling voice. He was surrounded by burly men. In a corner of the room sat a stout, elderly man with a long beard and thinning hair—and jade. Jade at his ears, around his neck, on his wrists.

He must be the Jade Elder.

He certainly carried himself like someone important. He was flanked by men who must have comprised his entourage.

“If they’ve come for Lord Lahan, Master, do you suppose that means they brought the indemnity?” a member of the entourage asked. He looked like an intelligent man; Maomao figured someone would need a lot more than just a big head even to be here right now.

“We’ve gathered everything we could,” Erfan said. From his robes he produced coins and silver ingots wrapped in cloth. They were attention-grabbingly sparkly, but the mismatched sizes spoke to how frantically they had been collected.

“Do you realize the size of the ship that we lost?” the Jade Elder asked.

“Consider it a down payment, if you would.”

“Not on your life. Lord Lahan will remain our guest until you come up with the *full* sum.”

This guy was out of his mind, Maomao thought. If this was his idea of being a businessman, it was no different from being a gangster.

“You heard the man, Sanfan...” Lahan gave her a strained smile.

Sanfan was openly distraught. “How much do you need?” she asked.

A member of the entourage wrote an amount and showed them the paper.

Ones, tens, hundreds, thousands...

Maomao’s head started to pound. Imagine how many courtesans could be bought out of their contracts for this much money!

“This amount is outrageous. Considering how old the ship was, half this much should be more than appropriate.”

“Time is money, and while I’m talking with you I’m *not* making any. We need you to compensate us for the time until a new ship can be commissioned.”

Sanfan and the man from the entourage glowered at each other.

Erfan was standing directly behind Maomao—presumably ready to leap to her defense should anything happen. Even at such a charged moment, Maomao couldn’t help taking a good look around.

The Jade Elder has two attendants, and there’s five other guys in here.

Whereas Maomao’s group had four people, including Lahan. No matter how good a fighter Erfan was, he was going to be helpless with at least two members of his group totally unable to defend themselves. Moments like this were when she would have liked to have a bear in human form with her, but it was no use wishing for someone who wasn’t there.

Every piece of the elder’s jade jewelry was stunning.

If he sold all that stuff, it’d probably make up what he lost from one ship.

Both the color and the size suggested the pieces were quite valuable. Maomao ought to know; she had spent enough time studying the Imperial Jade. For that matter, Maomao’s adventures in the palace had all started in the Jade Pavilion. She’d had to polish an awful lot of the stuff.

That was why she thought it a waste that the Jade Elder’s ornaments were a bit cloudy. That wasn’t an issue of quality, but of upkeep.

Something’s not right here, she thought, cocking her head. The Jade Elder was a portly old man—in generous terms he was ample; less generously, fat. His skin looked healthy, and he had surprisingly few wrinkles for an older man.

“Surely you’ll take it if we offer our house as collateral!” Sanfan said.

“No, it’s cash or nothing,” the attendant replied. Their discussion showed no sign of reaching a resolution anytime soon.

Is she allowed to just gamble their house like that?

Lahan was listening to the talks with a pained smile on his face.

Something is definitely fishy.

Maomao grunted. It wasn't just *something*—there were several things that nagged at her. The attendant was clearly authorized to speak on behalf of the Jade Elder. The elder himself had yet to say a single word, implying that he was happy to leave everything to his right-hand man. At the very least, one would expect him to break into the conversation if the man said anything wrong.

So why hasn't he?

Maomao was mystified. The amount the attendant had written down was substantial, certainly, but even at that, the offer of the freak strategist's mansion as collateral should have made some dent in the negotiations. The house was located on some of the capital's premier land, real estate that any investor worth his salt would have given his right arm to have.

It was just the kind of place that a powerful person with ambition to display and pride to satisfy should have salivated over. And it was so spacious. Families of comparatively brief history could hardly hope to obtain a plot of land like that: No matter how much money they might make, all the good places in the city were already taken.

If this were Hao we were dealing with...

He would have jumped at the chance no matter what it cost.

Maomao didn't know what that land was actually worth, but she'd heard that a single bedroll on real estate fronting a major avenue could cost as much as a woman servant in the rear palace made in a year. Even had there been no house standing on it, the value of the land alone should have wiped out whatever losses the Jade Elder had incurred. With the house, the elder should have been quick to return Lahan so he could try to make his money. That seemed like obviously the best way to recoup his losses. No matter how much Sanfan might be trusted with matters of business, she didn't have the power to sign off on deals. They needed Lahan or things wouldn't get anywhere—there were already several stalled jobs waiting.

Yet in spite of all of this, the attendant insisted on ready cash. He sounded almost like a tantruming child.

Do they need that much liquidity right away?

No; couldn't be. One of the most famous merchants in Li would surely

have some savings stashed somewhere. It was almost inconceivable that he wouldn't.

Could the attendant possibly have used it all up?

The man certainly wasn't showing any chops as a businessman, and the Jade Elder's failure to intervene suggested something was wrong with him too.

Then there was the fact that Lahan was preternaturally calm. He was cringing a bit, sure, but it didn't look like terror. He was a calculating man—and a totally helpless physical fighter.

He should be shaking in his slippers with all these bruisers around us. Yet he hadn't so much as wet himself. For that matter, he was looking at Sanfan the way one might look at an annoying child.

Does he know the real *reason he's been taken prisoner?*

And what could that reason be?

Hmmm...

Maomao couldn't let go of her suspicions about the jade that the elder was wearing.

"Hey," she whispered to Erfan. "Does the Jade Elder really wear jade all the time?" She didn't actually know if Erfan would have the answer to that question, but he was the only one she could ask at the moment.

"Yes, he does. Jade represents good health and prosperity, and I'm told he always wears the same ornaments when meeting visitors. They're the same as last time and the time before that. But I can't help feeling like the color of the stone keeps getting worse. Maybe he doesn't handle them correctly."

It keeps getting worse?

Maomao had definitely thought the jade looked cloudy.

"What do you mean by the last time and the time before that?"

"Last time would've been a few days ago. I believe they hadn't met for a while. The time before that would have been close to two years back, I think. Master Lahan needed a ship in connection with trade with Shaoh."

"And has the elder let his right-hand man do all the talking since two times ago?"

"Yes. I'm given to understand this is how he cultivates fresh talent. He stays out of the discussion except at the most important moments. He'll pipe up if his subordinate does the wrong thing."

“Hrm.” Maomao’s sense that something was fishy only got stronger.

The fruitless conversation, meanwhile, continued, with neither Sanfan nor the attendant giving an inch.

I understand why Sanfan’s trying to buy time, Maomao thought. She hadn’t brought Maomao along because she needed her skills. No, she assumed that if Maomao was here, it would spur the freak strategist to action. She must be trying to stall until he showed up.

Meanwhile the attendant, despite saying in so many words that “time is money,” was allowing the vain tongue wagging to continue. And as for Lahan...

“I’m just fine, Sanfan,” he said. “Could you go and make some money for the time being?”

“But sir!”

“I’m all right!” Lahan made a very sour face. He did not seem to like the fact that Sanfan wouldn’t back down.

And I know Lahan.

He was too calm. The bigheaded abacus-spectacles could do with showing a little more fear under the circumstances.

Then there was the Jade Elder himself. Maomao studied the portly old man.

“What’s with you? You keep staring,” the other member of the elder’s entourage said.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was just thinking, he doesn’t take very good care of his jade.”

“Are you trying to start something?” the man sniffed.

Is that how you took that?

Maomao let out a sigh. She looked the man square in the eyes and said carefully, “I know jade is very important to him. So important that he keeps it on him at all times. But don’t you think the color has degraded a bit lately?”

The attendant’s gaze flitted to the Jade Elder.

“Jade represents immortality. It shouldn’t be allowed to get cloudy, should it?”

“What, you think he’ll give you the jade just because you said that?”

“No, I just thought perhaps I could offer him a better way of maintaining the stone.”

Maomao took some oil paper from the folds of her robes. It was merely an extension of the way she was always well stocked with medicines and medical implements.

“That looks like ordinary oil paper.”

“Yes, that’s right. Actual oil is better, but this should do for polishing in a pinch.”

She wrinkled the paper to make it softer.

“You polish jade with oil?”

“Very much so. Jade is something of an unusual gem. Most gemstones degrade if you get oil on them, but jade benefits from occasional polishing with it. The stone’s color suffers if it’s allowed to dry out, you see.”

Maomao narrowed her eyes: They must know that much, at least.

The attendant looked at the elder. After a moment he said, “The master seems to have forgotten to polish his jade of late. He’s been very busy, you see.” Then he took an ornament from the Jade Elder’s ear. He rubbed it gently with the oil paper, and a bit of the sheen returned to its surface.

“They’re such fine pieces. They deserve to be well cared for.” She’d been right; he wasn’t looking after his things.

What now? Do I say it?

The murky jade. The silent elder. Lahan sitting calmly. The attendants doing such un-attendant-like things.

“Excuse me,” Maomao said, raising her hand. She needed to turn her speculation into certainty.

“What is it?” the attendant snapped.

“Aren’t you busy, sir? If time is so precious to you, surely you can’t sit here entertaining us. Do you perchance have a major commercial deal in the near future?”

“Of course we do. And of course we don’t have time to waste here. I think I may have to ask you to leave for today.”

“No, wait!” Sanfan said. She was about to argue further, but Maomao took her hand.

“Let’s go, Sanfan,” she said. “If the freak strategist really showed up here, it would push us past the point of no return.” She pulled—or really, dragged—Sanfan closer and whispered, “You want to get Lahan back in one piece, don’t you?”

That shut the other woman up.

“I’ll explain everything later,” Maomao continued to whisper. “For now, we need to get out of here.”

Only then did Sanfan finally come along quietly.

Once they were a safe distance from the Jade Elder’s house, Sanfan said, “What on earth did you mean?”

“Much as I hate to go to the mansion, maybe we could talk back there. Around here, there’s no telling where there might be eyes or ears. But the worst thing that could have happened back there was for that clueless old fart to come crashing in.”

“Wouldn’t Master Lakan’s presence have made the other guys play a little nicer?”

Maomao shook her head. “I know Lahan’s involvement has made this confusing. But the Jade Elder is not trying to get back at him over a business deal. I need you to keep that much in mind.”

With that, Maomao resolved to get back to the mansion as quickly as they could. It was the only way she would be able to calm the distraught Sanfan.

Chapter 18: The Jade Elder (Part Two)

Very much against her natural inclinations, Maomao found herself at the freak strategist's house. And it turned out they weren't a moment too soon.

"We're going in there! And we're going to rescue Maomao!"

"Yaaaah!"

There was a whole gang of big, bad-looking men. (Where had he found these people?) And there was the freak strategist himself at their head, astride a gorgeous horse.

Standing in the vanguard of this impromptu squadron was a very put-upon-looking Onsou. The rest of the crew, Maomao realized, seemed to be comprised of household servants and the freak strategist's subordinates. The participants in this little rally included Junjie and several of the kids. Zhizi was with Junjie, and they seemed to get along quite well, maybe because they were similar in age.

Oh, I do not *like this.*

Maomao didn't want to have one single solitary thing to do with any of what was going on, but she knew she had to stop it.

"Tallyhooooo!" the freak strategist cried. He had no staff of command but raised a feathered fan instead.

"Okay, stop! That's enough!" Maomao said, standing in front of the group and forming a big, forbidding X with her arms. "Thank you all very much for your hard work. You are dismissed!" She bowed her head.

The entire group stood stupefied.

"Maomao!" the freak strategist cried. In his haste to get off his horse, he slipped and tumbled to the ground. "I was so worried—I heard you'd been kidnapped again!"

"It's Lahan who's been kidnapped. Maybe you should go rescue *him*," Maomao said, careful to keep a prudent distance. As she talked, she dug in her ear with her pinky, then blew away what she came up with.

"Oh. Lahan. He'll come home when he's ready."

Sanfan looked stricken. It had actually been a rather interesting day in

terms of the wealth of expressions Maomao had witnessed from her.

“Well, Maomao! Shall I have them make some nice, delicious food to eat?”

Maomao was keen to go home as soon as she could, but she remembered that she hadn’t had breakfast. And that Sanfan was going to pester her until she explained things.

“I want chicken congee,” she said, deciding that a late breakfast was better than none at all.

She was led to a large room where she could take her meal.

“This used to be a banquet hall,” the freak strategist informed her.

The room had several tables and was the size of a small restaurant, but it didn’t seem to be used much—the servants were frantically preparing the tables and chairs.

“This will be perfect,” Maomao said. She proceeded to mark off the freak strategist with a white rope. “Please don’t cross this line,” she said.

“Yes, of course. Ah, a meal together! How long has it been?”

Had they *ever* had a meal together? If they had, it must have been back when Maomao was a food taster. In which case it might have happened quite often, in fact.

Once Maomao was sure that the freak strategist wasn’t moving from his spot, she sat at a table across the room from him.

I’ve gotten better, she thought. It wasn’t long ago that she wouldn’t have abided being in the same room with him, but now they were eating together.

“Excuse me,” Onsou said, looking at Maomao with a distinctly pained expression. “Master Lakan has a conference to attend this afternoon...”

“I won’t be long eating. You can take him back after that.”

“Things would be so much easier if you would spare just a word of encouragement, Lady Maomao...”

“Nope.”

With that curt refusal, Onsou went to the freak strategist’s table. Apparently he intended to dine with him.

Sanfan acted as Maomao’s waiter, making sure there was no one else in the vicinity. Erfan was posted at the door like a guard.

“Are you almost ready to tell me now?” Sanfan asked.

“Yes,” Maomao said, putting some vinegar in the congee she was

brought. She'd asked Sanfan if she wanted to join her, but Sanfan had replied that servants didn't dine at the same table as their masters.

"You're wondering why the Jade Elder accused and then kidnapped Lahan. The reason wasn't money. It's because Lahan learned something he shouldn't have."

"Such as?"

Maomao took a bite of congee. The chicken was so rich and the whole thing had such a salty kick that she was beginning to think the vinegar hadn't been necessary. Nonetheless, she stirred the stew idly.

"He realized that the Jade Elder is an imposter."

"An imposter!"

"They must have found someone who looked very much like him. Dress him up with enough jade, and no one would question him—that's his trademark, after all. And since the elder apparently left most of the business dealings to his subordinates, there's not even any need for him to talk. He just has to sit there and be imposing."

Sanfan had gone completely pale. "Th-Then you're saying..."

"Don't worry. I don't think it's going to turn out that the real elder was murdered or anything. If he had been, they would have shut Lahan's mouth long ago." Maomao made a slashing gesture at her neck.

"I can understand how Master Lahan might have figured it out, but what tipped *you* off that the Jade Elder was a fraud, Lady Maomao?"

Lahan had a unique ability to see everything in terms of numbers. The numbers would certainly alert him if a person was not who they claimed. This ability could also be frankly creepy, such as when it allowed him to take the precise measurements of a woman's body at a glance.

"For me, it was the jade itself."

"The jade? You mean, because it wasn't well maintained? That's what clued you in?"

"I think it was being maintained, just not the right way. But there's no way that the true Jade Elder would fail to know how to take care of his jewelry. Although if he were in good health, I don't think he would need oil to do his upkeep."

Otherwise it would be impossibly strange that his longest-serving subordinates would fail to notice the difference with a fraud Jade Elder.

"Jade symbolizes good health and even immortality. And when it comes

to health, at least, it's not purely superstition—it actually can be useful. Supposedly, it reveals the state of the owner's well-being when worn on the body. If the jade's color becomes cloudy, it means the person's condition is suffering."

Maomao took out the oil paper she'd used to polish the jade. "A healthy person's skin naturally secretes a certain amount of oil. And the Jade Elder is, let's say stout. He shouldn't have needed additional oil to keep his jade in good shape."

"But the imposter has an ample figure as well."

"Yes. Which makes me think he doesn't normally wear the jade, but put it on in a hurry for your visit." Maomao stirred her congee again. "If it's true that cloudy jade means the owner is sick, then I thought either the elder must have been wasting away from a long illness, or maybe was already gone."

Lahan had noticed too, which was all well and good. His mistake had been in letting them know that he knew.

"It would be a bombshell if people learned that the Jade Elder was dead. He may have plenty of capable people to take on the work, but it would throw the commercial world into chaos for a while," Sanfan said.

"Yes. Especially right before a major deal." With all the facts she now had, Sanfan was smart enough to figure out the rest. "I presume they resorted to an imposter just to spare the market that upheaval. They know they can't get away with it forever—it's merely to buy them some time. And right when everything had almost ended neatly, Lahan figured it out. Which would explain why they felt they needed to turn to force and kidnap him."

"Then when he says he'll be home soon..."

"I presume you'll see him again once things have calmed down a little." Maomao got seconds. "They know very well that their treatment of Lahan was inappropriate. They just panicked. And to be fair, Lahan deserves some of the blame for running his mouth instead of thinking."

Lahan must have been shocked at first, but once he understood what the elder's people were doing, Maomao was sure he had agreed to cooperate. He would have to miss a few days of work, but by keeping the Jade Elder's secret, he would strengthen his ties with the elder's people—and that would more than make up for the cost. It was a calculation on his part: Publicly, he

would have to pay an indemnity for the sunken ship, but he would get back far more than what he invested in return.

“But if that old fart gets himself into the mix, it could mean the end of everything.”

The freak strategist was even more impervious than Lahan was to people’s lies. Once it became public knowledge that the Jade Elder was no longer working, his business would take a major hit. His people would want to keep the situation under wraps until they had done everything possible to minimize the impact of the revelation.

“Business isn’t about trying to snatch money from your partner, it’s about negotiating to find the most advantageous outcome for everyone involved, isn’t it?” Maomao said. She hated having to speak up for Lahan, but it was probably in matters like this that he found his aesthetics.

After a long moment, Sanfan said sincerely, “Forgive me. I was too impulsive.”

“It’s fine. Most of all, I’m just glad to know that Zhizi is doing so well.”

“She is. Sifan and the others play with her all the time. Is that all right? They’re all former orphans...”

“What’s the problem? Zhizi’s older brother visits constantly. If he hasn’t said anything, I don’t think there’s an issue.”

Everyone knew that Zhizi’s mother was not to enter the mansion, and even Hao knew better than to mess with the freak strategist. Maomao wondered how much Hao would even really care about Zhizi now that she was of no practical use to him.

“Lady Zhizi still has a voracious appetite. I watch out to make sure she doesn’t get overweight.”

“Sure.”

“I’m also making arrangements for her education. I think it would be best if she had one.”

“That’s a big help.” Maomao found herself wondering why Sanfan was so perceptive about everything except matters relating to Lahan.

“She’s very attached to Master Lahan’s honored older brother. She eats raw vegetables all the time.”

Even here, Lahan’s Brother wasn’t called by his real name. Wasn’t that kind of a mouthful?

“Okay. But make sure you wash them first,” Maomao said.

“Understood.”

Maomao finished her second helping of congee and set her spoon in her bowl.

Ahhh. I want to just do absolutely nothing now.

It was past noon already, and the day was growing short. She needed to go to the market to do some dinner shopping—and then prep the meal. There was no hard-and-fast rule, but generally, Maomao and Changsha made dinner on days when they were off work.

“I’m sorry, but is there any of this congee left?” Maomao asked.

“They made plenty,” Sanfan told her.

“You think I could take some home with me?”

“I’ll make sure you have sides to go with it.”

Sanfan knew her business. Maybe, Maomao thought, she could score some of Lahan’s Brother’s vegetables while she was at it.

A few days later, it was announced that the Jade Elder had died. Maomao had expected turmoil in the markets at the news of a great businessman’s passing, but the elder’s people had done everything right, and there was far less consternation than she’d expected.

Later, Maomao heard that the man’s cherished jade had been buried with him. *That* news struck her as a terrible waste.

Chapter 19: Dr. Liu’s Question

“Maomao, is this an appropriate way to write the daily report?” Yo asked.

“I think it’s fine,” Maomao replied.

Yo was working in the same office as Maomao. She had always come to help Maomao when she could, but this was the first time she had been officially assigned there, and as her senior, Maomao was giving her detailed guidance.

The news that there was a young lady in the medical office naturally brought the soldiers around grinning; Maomao snapped her teeth at them intimidatingly. She also, of course, told Senior Wan-wan and the bulky Dr. Li what was going on, and they proved an effective “bug repellent” to keep the gnats away.

There were, however, still some idiots who insisted on showing up.

“Hey! So tell me, what was the smallpox site like?”

Namely, the one who trotted obliviously into the office was Mister No Salary himself, Tianyu. He showed up even though it meant weathering a storm of knuckles from his arch nemesis, Dr. Li.

“Didja get to autopsy any of the dead people? Were they puffed up inside, too, not just on the skin? Did they explode or anything?!”

Tianyu was pestering Yo relentlessly with his insatiable curiosity, so Maomao quietly went to call Dr. Li, who subdued the interloper with a vicious knuckle. He’d added joint locks to his repertoire recently too; he had become a senior Maomao could really count on.

“You don’t have to answer those questions, you know,” Maomao said.

If they blithely went around autopsying victims of smallpox, the outbreak could accelerate at a fearsome rate. Even if Yo and the others had already survived the disease once, they couldn’t be completely sure that they would never get it again.

“I know.” Yo was a strong person. She had to be; she’d survived two years of work in the rear palace. She was perfectly capable of ignoring the

likes of Tianyu. “I’m told that they actually did do autopsies on several bodies, though.”

“What, really?” Maomao asked, taken aback.

“One of them was the first child to be infected...”

“What did they learn?”

Yo shook her head. “It sounds like there was nothing unusual. But I’m in no position to try to find out much more.”

“Huh...”

Doctors were doctors: they’d probably been too curious *not* to do an autopsy. They were desperate to know the mechanism of infection.

Where did *this outbreak start?*

Maomao went back to work still feeling distinctly uneasy.

The question that inspired that unease turned out to be answered far sooner than she expected. When their shift was over, she was summoned by Dr. Liu. She straightened up when she saw the grim look on his face.

Is this about something I did?

He’d specifically summoned her only after Yo had gone home.

“I want to ask you again if we can trust this man Kokuyou,” Dr. Liu said.

After a moment Maomao replied, “His medical knowledge is unimpeachable, as I’m sure you know, Dr. Liu.”

“Yes, I’ve seen that much. But something bothers me.” His expression remained hard. “Word is that Yo is very close to Kokuyou.”

“Yes, sir.”

Meaning this was something he felt he couldn’t ask her; he had to check with Maomao instead.

“Has Kokuyou done something wrong?”

“Have you heard about the first case of smallpox infection in that village?”

“I’ve heard that it was a child, and that no one is sure yet where the infection came from. And Yo just mentioned to me that they autopsied the body, but it didn’t reveal anything.”

From the way Dr. Liu was talking, Maomao gathered that there was something about the situation that Yo had not yet been told.

“The truth is, we did learn something from the autopsy. The child had a

wound made with a bladed object. The child and his family were all deceased, so obviously we couldn't ask them directly, but according to the villagers, he had been the victim of a random attack while his family was traveling. There have been several other similar cases and several other young victims, but the culprit is still at large."

"A random attack? While traveling? Was he..."

"That's right. Going to another city. He suffered a cut, but it was just that—a scratch on the surface of the skin."

Maomao saw what Dr. Liu was trying to say.

Couldn't be... Could it?

Dr. Liu was quick to notice the change in Maomao's expression. "If you have any ideas, speak up. I know Luomen's taught you not to say anything too lightly. But right now I want to hear anything you have, even the most outlandish speculation."

Dr. Liu was actively encouraging Maomao to speak up.

"I think this attacker was trying to inoculate children with smallpox pus. Whether it was an experiment or an attempt to prevent them from getting the disease, I don't know. I do know that Kokuyou once deliberately infected Yo with smallpox, which ultimately has enabled her to resist it. Dr. Liu, are you suggesting that Kokuyou himself might be the cause of this current outbreak?"

"I can't be certain, but the possibility is there. Randomly attacking children isn't a very precise way to inoculate against disease, and only the one boy got it. It happened to be a serious case and to spread to other people, leaving us in the situation we're in now. Do you see the paradox?"

He was right. Maomao, however, had a question.

"Where did this attacker appear?"

"Can you read a map?"

"Yes, sir."

Dr. Liu took one out. He'd asked because there were many people who had never actually seen a map. He pointed to the capital city, then ran his finger in a northwesterly direction. "Here," he said. "Three days' walk away."

About a hundred and twenty kilometers, Maomao guessed. There on the map was the name of the all-important city.

"I've had a standing agreement with Kokuyou to visit the apothecary

shop in the pleasure district for a few days each month. Normally, he's in his village. There are elders in his place of residence, so you should check whether he was on the road at the time of the incident."

Kokuyou resided in a village where Maomao went to buy herbs. It wasn't that far from the capital, so it, too, was probably about three days' walk from where the attacker had appeared.

"You're telling me you think we can safely exclude Kokuyou as a suspect."

"Yes, sir. Or more precisely, I think the chances are vanishingly slim."

"You have proof?"

"It's not theoretically impossible, but I can't understand why he would choose a place that required him to walk three whole days. If this were an experiment, I could see wanting to do it in a distant town out of a sense of guilt. But at the same time, you have to be able to keep an eye on your subjects' progress. Travel time would be shorter by fast horse, but I really don't think Kokuyou has money to throw at something like that."

Dr. Liu listened pensively while Maomao explained.

"If he were inoculating children against smallpox, I don't see why he shouldn't do it closer to home. He knows the potential dangers better than anyone, so I can't imagine he would do it somewhere he couldn't keep an eye on things."

Dr. Liu stroked his chin. "Well spoken. Let's try a different premise, then."

"Premise, sir?"

"What if it wasn't an experiment or an inoculation, but a simple act of malice?"

That stopped Maomao in her tracks. Human malice was a terrifying thing—because it made people ignore calculations of personal benefit. People acting in malice would do anything to hurt someone else, no matter how much it cost them. Someone like that wouldn't shy from inflicting misery on themselves if they could drag the other person down with them.

Such a malice had taken root in the rear palace and birthed a rebellion, and an entire clan had paid the price with their own destruction.

"Do you know if Kokuyou is a malicious person?" Dr. Liu asked.

"I don't, sir," Maomao said. "What I can say is that I think he regards me as an equal."

Kokuyou could be a stickler when it came to money matters, but he never tried to take Maomao to the cleaners. There were plenty of people who looked down on her because she was a petite woman, but not Kokuyou. From that perspective, in her estimation, he wasn't such a bad person.

That, however, was Maomao's subjective opinion and not something she could state as a fact.

Dr. Liu was very hard on people who made subjective claims—perhaps inspired, Maomao thought, by his time traveling in the western lands with Luomen. As a leader, it was certainly more confidence inspiring to know he considered every possibility logically rather than being subject to unpredictable emotional impulses.

Don't think subjectively. Try to take an objective perspective.

Yo would be even more subjective than Maomao was. Hence why Dr. Liu had skirted around her and come to Maomao instead. It probably also explained why he had hidden the facts of the autopsy from her.

"I suppose you shouldn't say anything about this to Yo," Maomao began.

"I'm well aware of that, thank you."

"Just making certain, sir." She was pleased that it had turned out she wasn't here for a dressing-down, but in a corner of her heart she still felt the dregs of something.

"There are two other things I need from you," Dr. Liu said.

Maomao paused. "Yes, sir?" She flinched; maybe she had done something he was angry about, after all. She really, *really* didn't think she had done anything...but Dr. Liu looked very, very grave indeed.

"First, to your suggestion of going to Red Plum Village with this same Kokuyou. If you'll forgive the urgency, I want you to go tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

This must be part of the reason that Dr. Liu had been set on making sure Kokuyou was trustworthy.

"Secondly, I want you to check in on the Moon Prince's health regularly."

"Are you sure I'm the right person for the job, sir?" There were plenty of talented physicians in the palace. Maomao wasn't even a doctor. She was only asking for form's sake, though. Jinshi *couldn't* receive medical

treatment from anyone but her.

“Well, we’re not talking about a formal exam. Which I gather you did plenty of when you went to the western capital anyway.”

Kiiiind of...

She hadn’t had a choice; she was the only one who could check on the progress of the burn on his flank. Even so, she could understand why Dr. Liu might not be entirely happy about it. When you got right down to it, though, the only person to blame was Jinshi.

Maomao realized that Dr. Liu wasn’t issuing this order willingly; someone else had pressured him to send Maomao for the job. Chue’s face was the first that came to her mind, but Chue didn’t have the authority for this. In fact, she could count on one hand the number of people highly ranked enough to have been able to issue this order. All Chue could do was whisper.

“Again, forgive the lack of warning, but I want you to go immediately.”

“I understand, sir,” Maomao said, and bowed respectfully to Dr. Liu.

Chapter 20: Idle Chatter

So it was that Maomao found herself at Jinshi's pavilion.

She knew most of his guards on sight, and she was admitted with just a quick check of her possessions.

"Right, right, I'm sure you haven't had dinner yet. I've got something ready for you," Suiren said. She, of course, had a meal laid out like she was Maomao's own aunt.

The meal was full of things that Maomao would gladly have eaten, but she had to mind her place. Insofar as she wasn't mistress of the house, she could hardly just tuck in in front of a member of the Imperial family.

"These two place settings look oddly...alike." Maomao was perplexed.

"Just sit down."

Maomao often ate first, supposedly in order to taste the food for poison, but from the way the meal was laid out, she took it that today they were to dine together. Although it was a shame that there was no alcohol.

Still can't eat before the noble does. Maomao fixed her eyes on Jinshi. He took an awkward sip of congee.

"You may eat," he said.

Finally!

Having received Jinshi's blessing, Maomao started in on her own congee. It was rich with the flavor of chicken; rice and pieces of meat floated in it.

Jinshi regarded her as he sipped some tea. "How is work going?" he asked.

Maomao swallowed her mouthful of food before she answered, "No changes for me."

"None for me either," Jinshi replied.

"For me either," huh?

What she'd really meant was that Yao, En'en, and Yo all *had* seen changes—but there was no reason to go out of her way to correct his misimpression. Besides, it was better not to say *Hey, I wasn't asking about*

you.

Jinshi looked like he wanted to talk, but wasn't quite sure what about.

He doesn't have to force himself.

Maomao ate silently, then remembered that she was here on the pretense of checking on the Imperial younger brother's health. She chewed and swallowed the juicy *xiaolongbao* dumpling in her mouth, then set down her chopsticks.

"You appear to be in good health, Master Jinshi," she said. He used to always look chronically overworked, but that didn't seem to be the case now.

"Yes. Thanks to having a subordinate who's taken the edge off my workload—even if you don't like him. Thanks to him, I have tomorrow and the next day off. What about you?"

"I think I'm off work as well."

I'm going to Red Plum Village, though. That ought to count as work.

Jinshi having more than a single day off at a time was unusual—but he was right. Maomao *didn't* like the subordinate who had made it possible.

"Ha ha ha. If you're referring to the 'tiger' man, I think we should finish him off. It would be for the best in the long run. We can make it look like an accident! If one of your other subordinates did it, where's the problem?"

Maomao really, really didn't like Hulan ("tiger and wolf").

"Oh, please. Chue is already looking for any opportunity to turn him into a corpse."

Go, Miss Chue, go!

Maomao silently cheered for her fellow Hulan hater.

"He's also surprisingly good at gathering information."

"Oh, really? I'm sorry to hear that." Maomao tsked and wolfed down some more of her meal.

"You look like you're doing well too, Maomao."

"The most stomachache-inducing job is over now," she said, rubbing her belly. "Yes...my belly hasn't ached so bad since the *last* time I needed to examine someone's abdomen."

"O-Oh. And is everything else humming along?" Jinshi asked, endeavoring to change the subject.

"Now that you mention it, I received a letter from a friend of mine from the rear palace days."

“A friend of yours... That girl who was going to the school, you mean?”

“Yes, sir. I’m surprised you remember.”

“Well, she took it so seriously.”

Maomao wondered if Xiaolan’s attendance at the school was proving any help to her now.

“She at least learned her characters well enough to send a letter,” Jinshi observed.

“Yes, she did. But she always forgets to mention where *she* is now, so I can’t send a reply. She must have asked Seki-u or someone for my address.”

Jinshi *hmm*ed and stroked his chin. “I could look into it, if you want.”

“No,” Maomao said, shaking her head. “Leave well enough alone.” She took a sip of tea.

“Why not? Don’t you want to know what she’s up to?”

“I’d only write back once. ‘Don’t contact the pleasure district,’ I’d say. ‘It’ll only start unsavory rumors.’ And that would be it. It *is* important that people not tell strange tales about her.”

Frankly, a brothel was no place to send a letter. Maomao was given to understand that Xiaolan entrusted her missives to the guard at the pleasure district gate, and even so Maomao worried that someone might see her.

“We could set up somewhere else for her to send letters to you.”

“That would only mean more work for Miss Chue, wouldn’t it?”

If Xiaolan was happy, that was enough. If she had anything to do with Maomao, she would end up under surveillance herself. The censors would probably read her letters, and Maomao could only write back about the most innocuous things. So long as Xiaolan was enjoying a peaceful life, the right thing for Maomao to do was to leave her alone.

There were too many things Maomao had to be careful not to carelessly mention: Jinshi’s burn, the Emperor’s surgery, the smallpox outbreak.

At the same time, though, she was aware that she was being very cruel to Xiaolan. It was precisely because she wanted to keep hearing about Xiaolan’s innocent, ordinary days that she didn’t respond. At least until Xiaolan gave up writing to her...

I like that she makes me feel like I’m talking to her.

The letters allowed her to go back to those days in the rear palace when they sat by the laundry area together, eating snacks and reviewing the latest gossip.

Maomao turned to Jinshi. “Master Jinshi, have you heard anything about smallpox?” Even with him, she had to choose her words carefully. She had to be cautious not to say anything she shouldn’t.

“Hulan is investigating that very subject right now. I gather they don’t know where it started.”

“Yes, sir.”

Even among the doctors, certain things were not mentioned casually, by tacit agreement. That was probably why Jinshi simply said “it.”

“I’m told that a man named Kokuyou is suspected of starting it. That he may have spread it by deliberately infecting children.”

“You even know about that, sir?”

“*Is* he the culprit?”

Maomao shook her head slowly. “It’s not unthinkable, but he has no reason to do it.”

“So you, at least, don’t believe he’s behind this. He’s the one who sent you a letter begging you to get him to the Red Plum Village, isn’t he? Wanted to investigate their livestock?”

“Yes, and I’m going there with him tomorrow. Don’t worry—if he does anything fishy, I’ll let you know.”

If she spent too long lounging at Jinshi’s place, it was going to be awfully challenging to get up in the morning. She increased her eating speed a bit.

“Assuming Kokuyou isn’t the culprit, then, what kind of person do you think is?”

“You’re asking me to speculate?”

“Not speculate. Call it deduction.”

Jinshi’s face implied that he wished he could tell her to solve the mystery, like she had back in the rear palace days. Maomao crossed her arms: That, she thought, was inappropriate.

“This person targets children and scratches them with the seed of smallpox. It might sound like the same thing Kokuyou did, but it’s different in specific ways.”

“Such as what?”

“Kokuyou chose children who were in prime health to minimize the chances of the disease worsening. This criminal, however, is attacking kids at random. And because it’s random, there’s no chance to monitor the

child's progress." Maomao tried to get her thoughts together as she spoke. "It feels like they're playing pretend, but not doing a very good job of it."

"Playing?" Jinshi inquired.

"At being a doctor, perhaps. But it's like the way a child would do it. Like they've only scratched the surface and don't understand *why* a doctor does the things they do."

"So it's all pretend to them? Meaning they may have taken measures to prevent people from getting smallpox, but because they were only imitating what they'd seen, those measures failed."

"I thought so too at first, but there aren't that many people who know what measures to use against smallpox. Most of the people in the village Kokuyou attended died, after all. ...Hm?"

"What is it?"

"I heard something suggesting that at least one adult from the village had survived." Maomao tapped a finger to her forehead. She was pretty sure it was something Yo had mentioned, but her memory was hazy. "Talk to the palace lady named Yo and you might learn something," she said.

She was *pretty* sure Yo had mentioned it. Maomao munched on some more pickled vegetables. They were perfectly salted; she had a mind to eat everything in front of her.

"I have to say, it sounds like you have an awful lot of trust in this Kokuyou person. What kind of man is he?"

Hm?

Maomao was surprised to realize Jinshi hadn't interviewed Kokuyou personally. He saw so many people on a day-to-day basis that it would be easy for him to forget who knew whom or how well.

"He has smallpox scars over half his face. He can seem...inordinately cheerful, but he knows his medicine. And he likes to quibble about money."

Kokuyou kept the right half of his face perpetually hidden.

"The last time you disguised yourself, Master Jinshi, we created burn scars on your face, remember?"

"I do."

"He has pockmarks over the right half of his face, a little bit like that. It's a shame; he must have been pretty good-looking once."

"Oh, he... He was, was he?"

"Yes. Although not as much as you, sir." She had lost count of how

many times she'd said that to Jinshi.

"Good-looking. Of course... And well-versed in medicine. Although I gather he's not officially a doctor."

"No, sir. More of a wandering physician. He hasn't had what you would call a lot of good luck in life, so he goes from place to place. If he had somewhere to settle down, he might become a more serious practitioner."

"S-Settle down..."

Jinshi was becoming very sensitive. Maomao let out a sigh as she pondered how to handle him.

"He's an excellent work colleague. And *that's all*."

"Yes. Work. Of course. Work."

Maomao fished for something else to talk about in hopes of changing the subject...

...but she didn't say anything. There was no other subject to turn to. She and Jinshi, through no fault of their own, mostly talked about work.

Speaking of subjects...

Maomao picked up some of the noodles on the table. They, too, resided in a rich, flavorful broth.

"Come to think of it, Miss Chue mentioned a delicious *toshomen* stall a while back."

Jinshi echoed, "Toshomen...stall..."

These were things he could not eat, no matter how much he might wish to. The Imperial younger brother could hardly gallivant around town noshing at random street vendors. He *could* do it, in theory—he would have to borrow a servant's outfit and make sure to get rid of the aroma that always attended him. But the scar on his right cheek was too conspicuous for him to have a jaunt into town like he used to. They could conceivably dress it up like a burn to hide the scar proper, but that would be pretty noticeable in its own right.

During his time as a "eunuch," everyone in the rear palace had known who Jinshi was, but in town there hadn't been a soul who recognized his face. Now that everyone in the city was familiar with the visage of the Imperial younger brother, however, a new outfit and a little makeup was not going to be enough to let him wander about.

"Shall I ask if I can get takeout?"

"The noodles would go limp and cold, wouldn't they? The point is to

have nice, hot noodles on a cold day."

"I'm impressed you know so much about the methodology."

Maomao glanced in Suiren's direction. The old lady was a go-getter. Despite her age, Maomao could see her working to learn how to make toshomen of her own.

"Call me when Lady Suiren learns how to make the dish."

"Wait," Jinshi said. "There's a quicker way."

"Please don't work her too hard," Maomao said, taking him to mean that he could force Suiren to learn noodle making on an abbreviated schedule.

As Maomao was eating the last of her pickled vegetables, it occurred to her that she had to write a report on this visit.

It read, in its entirety: *Imperial younger brother in good health.*

Chapter 21: The Attacker (Part One)

The next morning, the carriage arrived bright and early.

True, it's close enough to be a day trip.

Maomao pulled on the overgarment Chue had given her. She climbed into the carriage hoping to catch a few winks on the way, but discovered there was someone else already inside.

"Koku—" she started. The man sitting across from her had half his face covered with a cloth. It was easy to mistake him for Kokuyou. "What are you doing here, Master Jinshi?" Maomao asked skeptically.

It was, in fact, Jinshi. He'd made up his face as they'd done for his disguise at the paper village; it looked somewhere between burned and pockmarked.

"I told you. I have a rare two days off in a row."

"That's so not the— Don't tell me your lust for toshomen was so strong that it drove you to this ridiculous disguise!"

Was this the quicker method of getting noodles that he had referred to?

"Even I'm not that desperate for a snack. I already had some plans in place relating to Lishu."

"Oh. That's what this is about."

"Yes. I do bear part of the blame that she finds herself in her current situation."

Jinshi had been overseer of the rear palace, and had been involved in deciding who was chosen as high consort.

"You were the one who selected Lady Lishu for the position of high consort, sir?"

"It was the only choice I had. If I'd made her a middle consort, I didn't know how the other ladies of her rank would have reacted to her."

Maomao nodded. That made sense. From Ah-Duo to Empress Gyokuyou to Consort Lihua, the upper ranks of the rear palace had been stocked with women of character. They had been above picking on Lishu.

"I don't know much about the middle consorts. What were they like?"

Maomao asked. To her recollection, there had been only a handful of them—but that handful had included at least one person who was willing to serve poisonous mushrooms to another consort. If Lishu had been thrown into their midst, she might have quickly found herself assassinated.

"Most of them were the daughters of prominent households or merchant families. Although there were a few like Lishu who were left over from the former emperor's rear palace."

Maomao paused before she asked, "Were those other consorts treated the way Lady Lishu was?"

"No, they weren't. They were older than fifteen when they came into the rear palace, you see."

"Oh..."

The former emperor had had a notorious taste for very young girls. These other women, by dint of being somewhat older and more mature, had not become his bedmates, and had presumably received official affidavits saying so.

As for the current Emperor, Maomao was sure that he had admitted Lishu, whom he regarded like a daughter, to the rear palace because he thought it would be the best thing for her. If a girl who had taken vows was to be married off again, it was typically as a second wife and purely in the pursuit of money.

"That must mean Master Basen is with us today as well," Maomao said.

"Indeed. You know about that?"

"Yes. Lady Maamei is very...considerate of her younger brother." She had sought Maomao's help more than once.

"Maamei seems to have a streak of... Well, let's say she believes love conquers all."

"Yikes."

"Don't say it. I've had enough stinging rebukes at her hands thanks to that."

Maomao wondered what Maamei had said to him. Even if it wasn't as brusque as the way she spoke to Basen, she could imagine the other woman being distinctly uninhibited with Jinshi. Maomao wasn't completely sure she approved of that, but since she did enjoy watching Jinshi squirm, she settled on simply offering a small smile.

"Come to think of it," Jinshi said as if a thought had just occurred to

him. He reached into the folds of his robes and took out a letter.

"What's this, sir?"

"I've had a report from Hulan—don't make that face."

Maomao's expression must have contorted when she heard the hated name. Maybe the reason she had grown softer on the freak strategist was because she had transferred her contempt to Hulan.

"And what did it say?" she asked. Whatever she thought of him as a person, he knew his business. It would be worth finding out what report he had made.

Jinshi unfurled a map. It looked like the same one Dr. Liu had shown her, marked with circles, dates, and arrows.

"This is the path taken by the person we're calling our random attacker as they sowed the seeds of smallpox. I say 'we're calling' them that since we don't know for certain that they're the culprit or a criminal."

Maomao looked at the direction the arrows were pointing. "They terminate near the capital, don't they?"

The most recent date was two days ago.

"That's right. This person may be approaching the city."

"Isn't this—?"

"Something catch your attention?"

"No, sir. It's just near the village where I often go to buy my herbs."

I hope it's just coincidence.

Maomao shivered. Immediately after which, she felt something drift down over her.

"Master Jinshi?"

He had placed an overgarment across her shoulders.

"I thought you might be cold. You're awfully pale."

"Thank you. I appreciate it," she said, pulling on the jacket. It was still warm with the heat of his body.

Kokuyou was already waiting for them when they arrived at Red Plum Village.

"Hullo, hullo!" he called with no obvious sign of nerves. In other words, like his usual self. Basen stood beside him looking very anxious indeed.

I'm seeing a lot of bodyguards.

Officially, this was just an inspection, so very few of them were dressed

in military uniforms. Maomao recognized many of their faces, and there were plenty of others who were just overtly burly. They must have scrambled to find guards when Jinshi suddenly decided to take a little trip.

Maomao took a good look around. There didn't seem to be any sign of Chue or Maamei. There was, however, one of the medical staff.

"Senior Wan-wan!" she said.

"H'lo." It was everyone's favorite, Dr. Wang. "We're going to check out the smallpox situation. They were worried about leaving it to you and an outsider like Kokuyou, so they decided I should come."

"It's heartening to have you." She'd assumed that another medical officer might accompany them, but to find out it was Senior Wan-wan! With his affable personality, he ought to get along with Kokuyou just fine. In fact, they looked like they were getting along already.

"Kokuyou has been doing some really fascinating research," Senior Wan-wan said. "Smallpox experiments using cows and horses?"

"I actually haven't heard the details yet, myself," Maomao said eagerly.

"Ha ha ha!" laughed Kokuyou. "We were having a grand old time in the carriage. Master Wang-wang tells me that you and he were involved in research about curing appendicitis with drugs?"

"That's right, we were. Anyway, do you think you could recap what you said in the carriage?" Maomao was practically snorting with excitement.

"Uh, I think the guy behind you is sort of glowering at you. Is everything okay? Hey, I think he and I might be two of a kind!" Kokuyou was clearly interested in the disguised Jinshi.

"All right, that's enough. It's rude to stare, you know," Maomao said.

"Oh, yeah..."

If she let Kokuyou look too hard for too long, he would see through the costume. Jinshi's bodyguards looked distinctly uneasy as well.

"All right, shall we start off by checking out those cows?" Kokuyou said. The stables were close, but the plan was to see the horses on the way back.

"Huh, is that person part of the tour? We've got quite a party for a simple inspection," Senior Wan-wan said. Evidently he hadn't been informed that the Imperial younger brother would be joining the inspection party. Jinshi had not only hidden the scar on the right side of his face but disfigured the left side with makeup, so the good doctor seemed unlikely to

catch on. There was, however, a distinct risk that someone would inadvertently be rude to Jinshi and that Basen would get physical with them. Jinshi was constantly shooting the young man little glances to keep him in line.

Just like before, the guard at the gate of Red Plum Village let them through without a fuss.

Guess we can pretty much come and go as we please.

Jinshi was of the same mind, for he said, “Is it wise to have such thin security here?”

“I had the same thought, sir, but I don’t think there’s much to be done,” answered Basen. “Red Plum Village covers a large area—there are plenty of ways to get in without going through the gate.”

One might have expected the hardheaded young man to insist on proper security. Maybe someone had sat him down and explained it to him.

“Did someone teach you all that?” Maomao asked.

If Miss Chue were here, she would be smirking her head off right now.

“Hey, Maomao! What’s with the unsettling smirk?” Basen demanded, flushing bright red when he noticed her look. No doubt he had Lishu in mind.

Maomao did have an impulse to tease other people, much as she hated it happening to herself. That’s how people are.

She didn’t take it too far, though, because she was more interested in hearing what Kokuyou had to say. “So anyway, Kokuyou. Tell me about these cows and horses.”

“Hmm, okay!”

“I’ll join you! I want to hear it again!” Senior Wan-wan said. So he, Kokuyou, and Maomao trotted along as a trio. Behind them, Jinshi just stared, but Maomao was more focused on Kokuyou’s story.

“There are many varieties of smallpox, you see,” Kokuyou began. “Humans aren’t the only animals to get it. Cows and horses do too.”

Maomao made thoughtful sounds as she listened.

“I discovered that among the pox caught by cows and horses, there’s a variety that’s similar to the one humans get. As you already know, once the human body has had a disease, it’s harder to get it again.”

“That’s the common wisdom, anyway,” Senior Wan-wan said.

“My mentor had this theory—he thought that if you got a disease, it

could make it harder to catch *other* diseases later. I guess he'd heard that houses with cattle don't get smallpox or something. I thought maybe it was the milk, but it looks like if a person catches cow smallpox, then it's harder for them to catch human smallpox after that."

"Ooh!" Maomao nodded to encourage Kokuyou to continue.

"As it turned out, though, when he actually found a cow with pox and exposed a person to it, that person later got smallpox like anybody else. This is just an idea, but maybe there are several different kinds of cow smallpox, and you have to use the one that's similar to human smallpox or there's no point."

He'd then collected pox pus from several different cows.

"He spent years repeating the experiment, finding out who catches smallpox and who doesn't."

Repeating the experiment? That got Maomao's attention.

"Excuse me," she said.

"Yes?"

"Was your mentor someone important, by any chance?"

"Oh, he was very important!"

She noted the past tense.

"In order to go back to his country, he needed some sort of achievement to his name. Oh, he was willing to try anything to get back there!"

And Kokuyou was one of the subjects he'd chosen for his experiments.

Jinshi and his entourage were right behind them. Maomao knew—and even Senior Wan-wan seemed to realize—that this was not a story they should continue to explore at this moment.

"Th-Think we're almost there?" Maomao asked, looking around pointedly in an effort to change the subject.

What she saw was not a cattle barn or horse stables, but a duck shed. A duck shed, and a pretty young girl in plain clothing.

"Is that Lishu?" Jinshi asked.

"Yes, sir," Basen replied.

Maomao could understand why Jinshi would ask. He'd only ever seen Lishu in the most sumptuous of outfits. Now she was dressed meagerly and held a basket of duck eggs. She wore no rouge, no whitening powder, no golden hair stick or silk shawl.

"She looks so healthy you would hardly recognize her, doesn't she?"

Maomao interjected.

“I do think her color looks better,” Jinshi replied.

“Oh yes, Lady Lishu has gotten much stronger.”

Normally Basen might have resented Maomao’s intrusion into the conversation, but today he looked downright relieved. He was probably just glad that Jinshi hadn’t dismissed Lishu out of hand for the way she looked now.

“I’d better go say hello,” Jinshi said and was about to go do exactly that when Maomao grabbed his arm. “Wh-What is it?”

“I think perhaps, Master Jinshi, it might be better if you refrain from speaking to her for the moment.”

“Ah, yes,” he said slowly. His long tenure in the rear palace had given him a unique insight into the female mind. He appeared to have grasped what Maomao was trying to say. Instead he said, “Basen, you go talk to her. Inquire as to her situation and report back to me.”

“But sir...”

“Look at my face right now. Lishu won’t know who I am—she may even be frightened.”

He’s not wrong.

Jinshi’s disguise was even better than before. Anyone would be cautious if an ill-looking man with smallpox scars over half his face approached them. And it would be so much trouble to explain that it was only Jinshi undercover.

Perhaps worst of all, though, would be how Lishu might feel to know that someone she had idolized as much as Jinshi during her time as an upper consort should see her in her present guise.

Maybe she’s gotten strong enough that it wouldn’t bother her, Maomao thought. At the moment, though, Jinshi would only have been a distraction. Maomao watched as Basen trotted up to Lishu. She saw the shy smile come over the girl’s face when she saw him approaching, and the slightly stiff but earnest grin that he returned.

I can’t express how glad I am that Miss Chue isn’t here right now.

She would only have been doing her ridiculous spying routine. Maomao had to admit she was curious herself, but she had other things to do.

“Shall we go?” she asked.

After a moment, Jinshi said, “Yes, let’s.” He was staring studiously at

the ground. Maomao wondered what could be the matter when she realized she was still holding his arm. He was trying to decide what to do with it.

“Come on, let’s go,” Maomao said, pulling Jinshi away by the very same arm.

Chapter 22: The Attacker (Part Two)

Kokuyou and the others were waiting at the barn when Maomao and Jinshi got there.

“You took your time,” said Senior Wan-wan, who was among those who had been waiting.

“Yes, my bodyguard here took her time,” said Jinshi.

Maomao let go of Jinshi’s arm, making it all look natural. “How does it look?” she asked Kokuyou, who was inspecting the animals, looking closely at their abdomens and milk.

“All beautiful, healthy cows! Not a trace of pox anywhere!” He sounded downright disappointed. There were almost twenty head of cattle there, and all of them had lustrous coats. Someone took very good care of them.

“It’s no surprise,” said the man tending the cows. “They keep a close eye on the animals’ health. If there’s anything wrong, the animal is immediately quarantined and switched out for a different one.”

That’s the right thing to do. I know *it is, but...!* Maomao ground her teeth. “Is it the same in the stables?” she asked.

“Sure is. Here, we take every care with the health of our cows and horses. If one of the chickens or ducks gets sick, we cull it immediately.”

Maomao didn’t say anything but clenched her fists, caught between frustration that they wouldn’t get what they came for and the knowledge that the village was making the right choice, since avian diseases could sometimes jump to people.

Before she could quite stop herself, Maomao asked Jinshi, “Is this place really for monks and renunciates? Or does it just look like it, when it’s really just a bunch of rich folks?”

“I hear they have many, ahem, patrons drawn by the lure of ageless immortality.”

Youth and life: two things for which the rich might be willing to pay any price.

At least it looks like they get good food here.

It wasn’t just the abundance of livestock; there were ample farm fields as well. They should have brought Lahan’s Brother along, Maomao realized.

“Maybe I should take a glance at the horses, since we’re here,” Kokuyou mused.

“The cows I get, but why would you look at the horses?” Senior Wan-wan inquired.

“Horses can get pox just like cows. Makes sense, right? After all, cow smallpox can even transfer to humans! And get this: The pox from cows that was effective against human pox, I’m pretty sure it was taken from a cow that had been raised alongside horses.”

Maomao and Senior Wan-wan both made sounds of understanding. Jinshi, however, did not; being out of their loop, he actually looked a little bored.

“Question!”

“Yes, Maomao!”

“Couldn’t you just take again from the cow that was effective last time?” she asked as if this were a class and Kokuyou were the teacher.

“Ahh! I’m afraid not. Since that cow was in a village in Hokuaren!”

“Hokuaren?!” Maomao exclaimed. This was news to her. “I know you said your mentor was from another country, but I never thought...”

“Yep! He was a Hokuaren man! My little brother and I were sold there as cheap slaves.”

His story just kept getting darker and darker.

“You’ve had it rough,” Senior Wan-wan said, sniffling, but Kokuyou patted his shoulder.

“Ha ha ha! There’s so many nice folks in the capital. I could almost just settle down here!” Kokuyou said merrily.

“Shall we move over to the stables? I think they were back by the entrance,” Maomao said, trying to point them toward finishing the job at hand. From what they’d just heard, though, it didn’t sound like there were going to be any sick horses, either. They were going to walk away empty-handed, but it was what it was. They might as well give up on progressing on the smallpox front and tackle a different problem, Maomao thought—a sign of how quickly she could switch gears.

When they got back, they discovered that Basen and Lishu were still

chatting sweetly outside the duck shed.

It seemed better not to send Jinshi into the fray, while Senior Wan-wan could sense the tenderness of the moment and kept his distance. And they definitely couldn't send Kokuyou. By process of elimination, it was Maomao who went up to the two. "Master Basen, Lady Lishu. I'm very sorry to interrupt, but we need to be moving to our next destination."

"O-Oh, yes."

"E-Er, ahem..." Lishu looked at Maomao and seemed to be trying to come up with a greeting, but stumbled over the words. "I-It's been a long time."

"It has, milady. Your pallor looks much better now."

"Yes, thank you." She smiled politely but somewhat hesitantly. Ducks pecked the ground around her.

"I've taken you away from your work. I'm sorry. I'll be going," Basen said, but in fact he showed no sign of moving; he only lingered longingly.

These people!

Maomao knew perfectly well that if she burst out that they should just get together already, she would only make things worse. Hence she kept it to herself, but she wasn't above giving them a little push.

"Lady Lishu. We have business at the stables. Perhaps you could show us the way?"

Lishu flinched but said, "Y-Yes, of course. Please wait just a moment." She hustled the ducks at her feet back into the shed, then came back outside.

The stables weren't actually that far away, and with Maomao and the others present, Basen and Lishu declined to carry on their conversation.

If they're not going to talk, I'd better.

Everyone was looking antsily at the two youngsters. They were like a pair of open books; they couldn't have hidden the romantic tension between them if they'd wanted to. In Maomao's opinion, the smell of roses was so thick in the air that the simple thing to do would have been to hurry up and get engaged. Then Maamei and Chue would be spared having to play matchmakers any longer.

Maomao recalled that Ujun had visited the medical office the other day, and made her opening gambit. "Come to think of it, it looks like Ujun is acquitting himself well in the military."

Specifically, as a gofer for the other soldiers.

“Oh, I see. My older brother must be working hard.”

Maomao didn’t mention Lishu’s father or half-sister. She’d heard that they had been banished from the U clan, but she didn’t know if Lishu knew that. No need to go out of her way to bring them up.

“Not as hard as you are, Lady Lishu. If I may be honest, I never expected to see you in such rude health.” Maomao was genuinely impressed. “The chapping isn’t too painful?” she asked, noticing the redness on Lishu’s fingertips.

“No. Red Plum Village has a very effective ointment.”

“You think I could take a look at it sometime?”

“Wha?”

They were researching immortality here. They must use all kinds of medicines. Maybe it was more than stables and fields—if they had a medical production division here, then by all means, Maomao wanted to see it.

“Do you have anyone in the village who’s particularly adept at making medicines?” she asked.

“I think there’s a building on the north side where they gather people making different kinds of medicines.”

“Could I possibly tour the facility today?”

“Maomao,” Senior Wan-wan said, patting her on the shoulder in a way that said *Give it up*.

“U-Um, we’re... We’re almost there,” Lishu said. Indeed, the gate had come into view. The stables should be right beside it. Red Plum Village didn’t have as many horses as it did cows, and Maomao had mostly given up hope that they would find any animal infected with pox.

“Wait. Something’s off,” Basen said, turning vigilant. The guard at the gate was talking to somebody. No... More like arguing with them.

“Oh, someone else is here. Another visitor?” Kokuyou said and trotted closer. Instinctively, Maomao grabbed his shirt and pulled hard. Kokuyou wasn’t expecting it, and tumbled square on his behind.

The man having it out with the guard was filthy; he obviously hadn’t bathed in days.

His eyes went to Maomao and the others—and almost bulged out of his head. “*K—K—Kokuyou!*” he bellowed at the top of his lungs, spittle flying

from his mouth. He flung the guard aside and charged through the gate, driving straight for Maomao and her group.

He was clutching a grimy dagger.

The bodyguards drew their swords. Even Jinshi pulled out a blade, pushing Maomao behind him with his free hand.

The man's knife was aimed right at Jinshi.

In the rear of the group, Lishu froze. Senior Wan-wan, too, stared at the man with no idea what to do. Kokuyou still hadn't hauled himself up off the ground.

Jinshi and his guards had reacted with alacrity, but Basen was quickest of all. Before they could blink, he was upon the assailant. He landed a punch to the man's gut and slapped away the hand with the knife, so that the blade went spinning through the air. It hit the ground at almost the same moment as its owner, whom Basen pinned to the dirt.

He can *get it done when he wants to.* Maomao almost found herself wanting to applaud. The only possible bad news for her people was that a few drops of blood were dribbling onto Basen's shoulder. The knife had grazed his cheek as it went flying.

"Is everyone all right?" Basen asked.

Better than all right—was what Maomao wanted to say. But at that moment, Kokuyou, who had finally gotten to his feet, looked at the crazed man on the ground and said, "Huh? Village Chief?"

"Village Chief?" Maomao echoed. "You mean the one in charge of *your* village?"

"Uh-huh." Kokuyou loped over to the immobilized leader. "Hey... Did you come here to *kill* me?" There was no anger or sadness in his eyes. The question was purely factual.

"K...Kokuyou! If it weren't for you... *You*...!"

"If it weren't for me, you would have gotten away with it?" He sounded almost indifferent. The man flailed in Basen's grasp.

"Don't move!" Basen pinned the chief's head against the ground. Maomao made to go over to Lishu, who was visibly frightened, but Jinshi was still holding on to her and she couldn't actually move.

"Chief... Are *you* the attacker?" Kokuyou asked.

It would certainly connect a lot of the dots. A survivor of the smallpox village would know the inoculation protocol. His methods were messy

because he wasn’t a medical professional, just somebody aping what he had seen real doctors do.

The chief twisted his head to the side enough that he could yell, “Why do you get all the thanks and praise?! When I—! When I—!”

He looked to be somewhat over forty years old, and clearly he had a high opinion of his own worth. He was the village chief, yet there were villagers who had revered Kokuyou even more than him. He had tried to solve that problem by chasing Kokuyou out, but that had only allowed smallpox to consume his village. The only survivors were himself and those who had been close to Kokuyou.

With his own partisans gone, he had been wandering alone all this time.

“If it weren’t for you...! You damned *penghou*!”

Penghou?

What could that mean?

Whatever it meant, as much antipathy as the chieftain had held for Kokuyou, he had imitated his methods—and sparked all this trouble.

Jinshi’s bodyguards acted quickly to tie up the chief. Basen stood, wiping his bleeding cheek with the back of his hand. Maomao squirmed out of Jinshi’s grasp.

“Hey!” Jinshi exclaimed.

“I’m not a cat!” she snapped.

She inspected the dagger the chief had dropped. The blade was specked with rust, and she thought she could see some sort of powder rubbed onto it. She got a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as she looked at Basen.

“Master Basen, here,” said Lishu, taking out a handkerchief and offering it to him.

“But Lady Lishu, I’ll filthy it.”

“It’s all right. Your injury is more important.”

“Uh, sorry to butt in when you two are busy in your own little world, but this blade has traces of smallpox on it,” Maomao said. It was not an easy announcement to make.

Basen froze. “What? What does that mean?”

“It means you may catch the disease yourself,” Senior Wan-wan advised him.

“Yep,” Kokuyou agreed.

“Quarantine Basen,” Jinshi said immediately. His swift judgment call

was a huge relief.

Basen, still too stunned to quite process what was happening, found himself being led off by the other bodyguards. Senior Wan-wan was already cleaning the wound on his cheek.

I think the actual risk of contamination is virtually nothing, to be fair.

Frankly, the rust on the blade was more dangerous. When the poison from rust got into a wound, that carried a significant mortality risk.

“Where would be the best place to isolate him?” asked Jinshi.

“Good question. Maybe in the clinic in the capital where they’re doing drug trials?” Maomao said. The trials were on a much smaller scale than before, so there should be some vacancies. Jinshi passed the instructions to his guards.

Kokuyou trotted over, grinning. “Real sorry about this. Guess he went for you thinking you were me!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Jinshi replied.

Two men stood there with half their faces covered to conceal injuries. From a distance, it would have been easy to confuse them.

“Ha ha ha! Hey, you’re not such a bad guy!”

Maomao was still thinking about what the chief had said. *What did he mean by penghou?*

She wanted to interrogate Kokuyou about it, but Lishu was beside herself as she watched them take Basen away.

She has to be the priority.

“Lady Lishu,” Maomao said.

“What... Uh... What will happen to Master Basen?”

“He’ll be quarantined, just for safety’s sake. He’ll simply have to take a rest for ten days or so. I have an idea.” Maomao looked straight at Lishu. “If you’re worried about him, why don’t you stay with him? The whole time.”

She had decided to take a page from Changsha’s book—to get straight to the point of things.

“I—I’m hardly in any position...”

“No? Why not? Are you worried about what people will say at *this* late date?”

“I’d only be a nuisance to Master Basen!”

“So if he says it’s all right, then there’s no problem, I take it.”

Lishu went beet red. Maomao’s eyes flitted to Jinshi.

“There’s... There’s the ducks to take care of...”

Hrm...

Lishu had actually learned to stand up for herself a little. She was demonstrating both her commitment to her duties and her attachment to the fowl.

“I’m sure we just need to talk to the right people. A compassionate superior should be able to hammer out a compromise or two,” Maomao said with another glance at Jinshi. “Lady Lishu, there are more people hoping for your happiness than I think you realize.”

With that, she set off toward the stables. They still hadn’t checked on those horses.

Chapter 23: Quarantine

Quite against his will, Basen was removed from duty for ten days. As Maomao had suggested, he was housed at the clinic where drug trials were being conducted.

“Just leave this to me,” said Yo, who was examining Basen. She was far more qualified than Maomao to deal with a potential smallpox case, and having only one patient to worry about must have been a cakewalk by then. The only real problem was Basen’s discomfort around women in general, but he would just have to live with it. Maomao could visit this clinic once every few days, so it made it easy to check on his progress.

“When can I get out of here already?”

That was Basen’s question every time she talked to him when work brought her to the building. They were speaking through a closed door.

“We already told you, quarantine is for ten days,” she replied.

“But I’m fine now! And after all the disinfecting you did...what problem could there be?”

She felt for him, but there were appearances to keep up.

“People at the smallpox infection site have been saying the exact same thing and trying to run away, making all kinds of trouble for everybody. Are you going to do the same thing?” Maomao asked a bit acidly.

“Urk...”

When Basen fell silent, Maomao took a letter out of the folds of her robes. “I have a letter for you from Lady Lishu. Read it over and try to calm down a little.”

“A letter from Lady Lishu?!”

“Yes, as well as some from Lady Maamei and Lady Taomei.”

Basen didn’t say anything to that.

Maomao slid the letters under the door. She couldn’t shake the sense that she would be in for the exact same conversation in a few days’ time.

Basen was alone in one of the clinic’s rooms. Yo prepared his meals and set them outside. The toilet was communal, but other than that, he wasn’t

allowed out of his chamber.

Right. She had checked on Basen and delivered the letters. She'd intended to help a bit around the clinic and maybe replenish some medicines, but she discovered that Yo had been hard at work and had finished all those tasks.

"Please, Maomao, take a rest," Yo said. "If you've got time to kill, read one of those books over there or something."

Not content simply to look after Basen, Yo was taking Maomao's work too. As well as, by the look of it, that of Senior Wan-wan and the others—the pile of time-killing books had really accumulated.

Left with no real choice, Maomao pawed through the books. She found a copy of Kokuyou's notes among them.

I swear I don't regret paying for them, though.

She had already made her own copy by hand. She went in search of something else to read.

"Maomao?" Yo called. "The doctors lent me this, very quietly... Want a look?"

"Who lent you wh—what is *that*?!"

Kada's Book?!

The battered old text had been restored and a neat copy had been made. The real thing could never have been taken out of its room because the text was, for all intents and purposes, forbidden.

"How did you get this?"

"I'm told it's special. They said since I'm going to keep working with smallpox in the future, I ought to know what's in it. They only lent me the specific section about that disease."

It was true: The passages about autopsies, which ordinary people *definitely* couldn't be allowed to see, had not been copied.

Kada's Book was bug-eaten in places, so they'd had to supplement what it said with Maomao's knowledge and Kokuyou's materials, among other sources. It was intellectually intensive work, but so much fun that Maomao could forget all about the time.

In order to prevent someone catching smallpox, you can give them a weak version of it. But even though the poison is weak, it can cause severe symptoms.

Maomao already knew a fair amount of what was in these pages, but she

eagerly reviewed them nonetheless. From where she was working in the next room, Yo asked, “Maomao, can I talk to you a little bit?”

“Sure.”

“It’s about Master Basen. Is it true the man who injured him was our village chief?”

“So you heard about that.”

“Yes.” Maomao heard crunching as Yo pulverized something in a mortar. “The village chief was a shaman in his own right, and chased out the doctor. Other than me and mine, he was the only survivor.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“He so loathed the things doctors did, and now I find out he’s been going around imitating them?”

Yo sounded mystified, but Maomao thought she could understand. “Maybe the facts convinced him that what Kokuyou did was right, and he was trying to put it to use.”

Even if he might have been better off just dropping dead.

Maomao had the thought but didn’t let it come out of her mouth. She did, however, consider *why* he had survived. “Was the chief more fit than the rest of the villagers?” she asked.

“As our representative, he handled purchasing provisions. Did he get a larger share than everyone else? I’d have to say yes.”

Good nutrition would increase survivability. Maomao could think of another possibility too.

“Had he already had smallpox, by any chance?”

“That, I don’t know. He always wore clothes that covered his skin, though. He said it had to do with being a shaman. Oh! And...”

“Yes? What else?”

“He claimed he never got sick, from anything. Thanks to his spells.”

Maomao was starting to think that the man wasn’t a shaman—just a huckster. Frontier villages were often full of the indigent, or those who couldn’t go back where they had come from. She suspected this chief was the latter.

Three days later, Maomao was back at the clinic.

“No! Absolutely not!” she heard Yo shouting. It must be Basen trying to get out of his room.

She discovered that Yo had once again appropriated Maomao's work, so Maomao set herself to reading some more.

"Doesn't he *ever* get tired of the same thing?" said Yo, who was holding a bucket. Presumably, it was to allow Basen to wash himself—he couldn't use the bath.

"That's Master Basen. He is what he is. He's a soldier—his body must be wasting away in there."

"You think? I keep hearing a lot of crashing from his room. And he asked me to bring him the biggest rocks I could find."

Must be doing his strength training in there.

The crashing was probably Basen grabbing rafters to do pull-ups, and the rocks must double as hand weights. Maomao smiled wanly.

Yo put the bucket away and started making medicine again. It was nice, simple work; all Maomao had to do was take a peek now and then and make sure her technique looked good.

"Um... Do you know what will happen to the village chief?" Yo asked, watching Maomao's reaction as she spoke.

"No matter what his reasoning was, I don't think he'll escape capital punishment."

He had injured multiple people and caused a smallpox outbreak. Furthermore, even though he hadn't realized it, he *had* attacked a member of the Imperial family.

"What was the chief like?" Maomao asked Yo.

"I can only speak for my family," she said after a moment, "but we followed him to that frontier village. If it hadn't been for the smallpox, we'd probably still be there."

For better or worse, it sounded like he had been a fairly typical village leader. Even if, in Maomao's opinion, it took some balls to nominate *himself* for the position.

"All right," she said, ready to ask what had been on her mind. "Then what is a penghou?"

"Penghou?" Yo echoed. "What is that?"

"That's what I want to know. It's a word he used to describe Kokuyou when he was apprehended. I've been trying to figure out what it means."

Yo took a brush and wrote two elaborate characters meaning "surging" and "lord."

“What’s this?” Maomao asked.

“It’s the name of a kind of fairy. There are different versions of the legend, but in the one I know, it’s a tree spirit, much like a *kodama*.”

“A *kodama*? You mean those things that supposedly echo your words back to you when you shout in the wilderness?”

“Exactly.” Yo added a little illustration of a mountain. “I remember now. Doctors often return what their patients say like an echo, right? So the people of my village used to say that they talked like kodama.”

“Or penghou,” Maomao mumbled. The villagers weren’t wrong.

Maomao headed to the clinic on the tenth and last day of Basen’s quarantine. She didn’t have work that day—she mostly just wanted to gawk at Basen when he emerged after all that time in isolation. She and Yo were just about to let him out of his room when they heard distinctive pattering footsteps.

“I’m here to fetch my brother!” the newcomer drawled. Maomao only knew one person who talked like that.

“Miss Chue,” she said.

“Yes indeedy, Miss Chue is here!” Drawl, drawl. “Miss Maomao and Miss Yo. And...” Without missing a beat, she flung open the door to Basen’s room. They found him, bare-chested, in the middle of a push-up.

“Whoa! You can’t just burst in here!” he exclaimed. He flushed bright red and grabbed his shirt to cover himself. For such a slim guy, he was awfully buff. Jinshi was relatively well muscled himself, but Basen was at least two degrees beefier.

“Hoo hoo hoo! It’s just family. There’s no need to be so embarrassed!” Chue chortled.

“I can’t be caught in such a compromising state in front of a young lady!” Basen said and pointed at Yo. Maomao would be ignored in these calculations—as she always was.

“Anyhow, my dear little brother, let’s go home.”

“I can go straight to work!”

“Ho ho hooo! You *smell* like someone who’s been locked in a room for ten days. Go home and take a bath today, then go to work tomorrow. Unless you *want* the Moon Prince to chase you out for reeking so bad!”

Basen hurriedly took a sniff of himself.

“There’s a horse waiting outside. Use it to get home,” Chue said.

Basen was about to charge out of the room, but then he paused, went back, and picked up a bundle of papers. It was a sheaf of letters.

“There! Miss Chue’s work here is done. I think it’s time for a little tea.”

Chue started making tea, appearing to know exactly where everything was. As far as Maomao was aware, she’d never been to the clinic before—but this was Chue, and Maomao was willing to accept that as explanation enough.

Maomao wiped off a table and let Chue give her tea. There were no snacks, but Chue produced meat buns from the folds of her robes.

“Milord! I warmed these up before I came!” she chirped.

Maomao didn’t say anything. The buns were lukewarm in a sort of gross way. She set hers beside her drink to let it cool down. Chue’s theatrical behavior might have had some meaning or purpose, but Maomao had no idea what it could be, so she ignored it.

“Miss Yo, do you want one?” Chue asked, taking out another tepid bun.

“No, thank you. I think I should be getting home too,” Yo said.

“That’s too bad!” Chue waved a handkerchief in farewell to her. Normally Maomao would have expected her to try to convince the other woman to stick around, but today she seemed unusually accepting.

Almost as if she were waiting for Yo to leave.

“Is this something you can’t talk about in front of Yo?” Maomao asked.

“Life is so easy with you, Miss Maomao! I never have to explain myself!”

“Ugh. I wish I hadn’t said anything.”

Now she would have to listen to whatever Chue had to say. Maomao made a show of covering her ears.

“Ohhh, don’t be like that, just hear me out! You want to know more about that village chief, don’t you?”

Maomao let her fingers slip off of her ears. Instead she busied herself with a sip of tea.

“The chief admitted to being our unknown attacker,” Chue said. “He didn’t think of himself as a criminal, of course—he thought he was helping people. Oooh, it gives you the shivers, doesn’t it? Good intentions with bad perspective!”

“Yeah. You know what they say about the path to hell...”

“Precisely. While he was doing that, he was also looking for Mister Kokuyou. A man with half his face covered in smallpox scars? Not a lot of people fit that description—if he really threw himself into the search, he was bound to find his man eventually. That’s what brought him all the way to the capital.”

“And what is it about this story that you can’t tell Yo?”

“Miss Yo’s family seems to have bumped into the chief somewhere along the line. Pure chance! That’s how he learned that Mister Kokuyou was being treated like a proper doctor.”

“Ah.”

The chief must have really ground his teeth at that. It didn’t matter that he was the leader or a shaman; he had never been able to command the full respect of his villagers, and in the end his village had been destroyed. He had decided that maybe imitating what Kokuyou had done would get him what he wanted, but his whole plan backfired. Then, to add insult to injury, he discovered that the very person he hated and envied so much was serving at the palace!

“Then he sees a man with half his face covered leave town in a carriage. What do you suppose he made of that?”

Maomao didn’t know whether it was Jinshi or Kokuyou that the chief had spotted.

“That’s why he followed him all the way to Red Plum Village,” Maomao said.

“Yep!” Chue grinned. “After they were done asking him everything they wanted to know, he was sentenced to death.”

“That’s about what I expected.”

“But a couple of days ago, he hanged himself with a sash in his jail cell!”

Maomao almost dropped her teacup. “I suppose it was his last defiant act of rebellion.”

“That’s why I didn’t want Miss Yo to hear about this. Her own family let slip about Mister Kokuyou, leading to an assault on an Imperial family member and then a suicide.”

Yes, Yo probably would feel somehow guilty about it.

“But then Miss Chue had a thought. This village leader, he might seem pretty awful to Mister Kokuyou, but maybe the other villagers didn’t think

he was that bad."

"Maybe," Maomao agreed after a moment.

At the very least, Yo's family had been willing to chat with him about her and Kokuyou. They didn't seem to hold the destruction of their village against him.

"People see things very differently depending on their situation," Maomao said. "But I wonder how Kokuyou appeared to the village chief."

"Oooh! Guess we'll never know now!" Chue said, and reached for the bun that sat untouched by Maomao's teacup.

Each person, each perspective, could see a different side of a situation.

"Penghou," huh?

Maomao felt it was essential that she learn what kind of person the chief had perceived Kokuyou to be.

"Miss Chue, Miss Chue," she said.

"What is it, Miss Maomao?"

"Do you think I could see Kokuyou?"

"Of course! Just leave it to Miss Chue!" Chue replied, and grinned again.

Chapter 24: Penghou

Maomao found herself led to a mansion somewhere in the capital. She didn't know whose house it was, but it was redolent of medicine.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"This is Dr. Lao's house," Chue drawled. "Mister Kokuyou is staying here."

The building was modest but clearly had a long history.

"Miss Maomao, I know you're about to be busy, but they do need you to examine the Moon Prince—we're leaving that in your hands!" Chue said, the delicately coded message being *Hurry up and get this over with.* She went on, "It's a pretty nice place to stay. It's got that perfectly imperfect feeling."

Dr. Lao's family and servants bowed their heads and didn't move as Maomao and Chue went by. The only exception was a woman Maomao took to be the doctor's wife, who raised her head and smiled softly.

"What's the story for why I'm here?" Maomao asked Chue, noting that reverence on the wife's face.

"Dr. Lao's household has a way of being a little too friendly with visitors. So I told them you were here on the Moon Prince's orders. 'Borrow the fear of the tiger,' as they say!"

"Can we...do that?"

Didn't that constitute an abuse of her position?

"I decided it would be a bigger problem if you were late to visit the Moon Prince," Chue replied, herding Maomao to an inner room. "He's this way, come on."

She stopped outside of the room.

"You're not coming in?" Maomao asked.

"That's a good question. I'm loath to leave you alone with a man, Miss Maomao, but let me ask you: Do you really want Miss Chue there for this chat?"

Maomao didn't say anything. Chue was a sharp one. She was probably

alluding to the subject Maomao intended to bring up with Kokuyou.

“If anything happens, just say the word,” Chue chirped. “Gallant Miss Chue will race to Miss Maomao’s rescue!”

“I appreciate that,” Maomao said, and then entered the room alone.

She found Kokuyou sitting and reading a book. “Hullo!” he said, just like he always did.

“Did you hear about the village chief?” Maomao asked.

“Sure did! Heard he hanged himself. He must’ve been through a lot. He looked real different from how I remember him.”

“He called you a penghou.”

“Penghou?” Kokuyou cocked his head; he didn’t know what it meant either.

“It’s a kind of fairy creature. A tree spirit, I’m told.”

“Huh! I wonder why he thinks I’m like that.” Kokuyou looked sincerely clueless.

Maomao had been equally flummoxed—but now, she understood. “You know what an echo is, don’t you?”

“Well, sure. It’s when you’re out in the wilderness and your voice comes back to you.”

“And do you know that some people say it’s a creature called a kodama that sends it back?”

“Oh, yeahhh! I’ve heard that one.” Kokuyou replied, his smile never faltering. Maomao didn’t think he was a bad person. When had they first met? It was on a wharf on her way home from the western capital, wasn’t it? Maomao and her group had succeeded in getting Kokuyou aboard a departing ship. In repayment, Kokuyou had produced a nausea remedy for the perpetually seasick Lahan.

Maomao remembered their next encounter: Kokuyou dressed in drag, attempting to take the palace ladies’ exam.

Then Maomao had asked Kokuyou to keep an eye on Sazen at the Verdigris House; she had been worried about him. She’d been willing to pay, so Kokuyou had been perfectly happy to be Sazen’s minder.

Now, most recently, Maomao’s introduction had gotten Kokuyou what amounted to a physician’s job. He must have been doing well enough at it, because they continued to pay him a substantial salary.

“It sounds like you were on pretty good terms with Yo and her family,”

Maomao remarked.

“Uh-huh! They were very good to me.”

“That’s why you variolated them so they wouldn’t catch smallpox, and taught them other medical tricks too, or so she said.”

“Uh-huh.”

Variolation referred to inoculating someone with the “seed” of smallpox—Maomao had found the term in Kokuyou’s materials.

Kokuyou set down the book he’d been reading. It had something to do with medicine too.

“All right,” Maomao said. “So what about the village chief and the other villagers who *weren’t* kind to you?” She clenched her fist.

Kokuyou paused a moment before he answered cheerily, “I had as little to do with them as I could!”

“What about when they went out of their way to harass you?”

“Hrrrm,” Kokuyou said. “Do I *have* to answer this question? I really liked being friends with you, Maomao.”

Maomao felt herself break out in goosebumps. “Was it you?” she asked. “Did you spread smallpox in Yo’s village?”

For an instant, Kokuyou froze—but then he said, “No, it wasn’t me!”

Maomao was glad to hear that. Otherwise, that clenched fist probably would’ve connected with his jaw.

“But I did figure that with me gone, there was no need to do anything special to get back at the village. And it’s a fact that the village chief chased me out.”

Kokuyou hadn’t done anything. And by doing nothing, he had killed his enemies.

“Without my treatment, the moment the smallpox outbreak started, they were as good as dead!” he said lightly.

Kokuyou had chosen to get them back by doing nothing. Probably the only thing he hadn’t counted on was that the village chief would survive.

Echo. Kodama. Penghou. Maomao saw now why the chief had called him what he had.

“You’re like a mirror,” she said.

He returns decency for decency and malice for malice.

Simple as that. Just like how your voice echoes back when you yell into the hills. Kokuyou merely reflected what was in a person’s heart.

No wonder he's such a clever negotiator.

Maomao had perceived Kokuyou as a good person, she realized, because to him, her own actions had looked like decency. By the same token, she could almost see what must happen to those who approached him with cruelty.

"When did you get smallpox, Kokuyou?"

"More than a decade ago!"

"In that case, where did you get the smallpox you used to inoculate Yo and her family?"

Kokuyou's own scabs would have been highly infectious—but probably not for that long.

Kokuyou grinned. Instead of answering, he removed the cloth covering the side of his face. His otherwise handsome visage was covered in pits. "Can you tell that I've got more than just pockmarks here?" he asked.

"I think I see some divots."

"You got it. I was beaten with a club. A bandit—he stripped everything off me. I hadn't done anything. I was just fleeing in a daze, trying to take every step I could away from the lands that held the memories of my time with my mentor and my little brother."

The tone of his voice never shifted—he sounded just like his usual cheerful self.

"Because of smallpox, I lost my mentor and my brother. It was spring of that year—if it had been summer or winter, I probably would have died too. After the beating, I tottered around looking for herbs to stop the bleeding. It's the strangest thing—it would have been so easy to kick the bucket, but instead I went around trying to survive! Barely clinging to life, I begged for help at a nearby village. There was someone really kind there, kind enough to nurse a pox-scarred person like me back to health. But it wasn't all good souls. The other villagers didn't like me and wanted to chase me out. Oh yeah... One of them was the bandit who had attacked me. He told people he was going out to do day labor, but he was really attacking and killing travelers!"

Kokuyou's tone remained unconcerned, and his story remained as dark as ever.

"Boy, did he not like having me around! I was pretending not to know who he was, so he was desperate to get me out of there before I figured it

out. I get it—he would come back with the money he'd stolen, and everyone loved him for earning more than anyone else in the village. It was almost funny, but naturally he tried to shut me up—so I thought a little payback was appropriate."

"What kind of payback?"

"I turned him into a seedbed!"

A seedbed for what? Maomao didn't have to ask.

To minimize the dangers inherent in variolation, one needed a healthy body and an environment where the subject could be nursed through the experience.

A seedbed required none of that. The weaker the subject, the better the seeds would grow.

"I'd like to ask where your compassion is, but I guess he technically started it," Maomao said, pressing a hand to her forehead.

"Uh-huh. And I'm sure the other villagers would never have listened to me, no matter what I said."

Maomao wasn't willing to dismiss Kokuyou's logic out of hand. The thing was, though, there seemed to be no limits on what he would do. He would do unto others as had been done unto him—with no thought for whether the "others" would live or die.

"Did you do it with malice, Kokuyou?"

"Malice? No, never! It's just, my little brother taught me that when someone gets you, you have to get them back. So I did. That's all."

"Your brother?"

"Uh-huh. The twin brother who died and left me."

Yes, Maomao did recall hearing about that.

"You were each given different kinds of smallpox in an experiment, right?" she asked.

"Yeah. I got the human kind, and my brother's came from livestock. His was real weak, so he was fine, but I got super sick and almost died!" Kokuyou's hand brushed the scars on his cheek. "My mentor was a brilliant doctor and was kind enough to raise us—but he was a coward. He wouldn't try the experiment on himself until he had done it on us first. It's kind of incredible—all those years researching smallpox, and he never got it himself."

"I suppose he made his disciples do all the dangerous work," Maomao

said flatly.

Kokuyou was a very strange person. He had neither goodwill nor ill, but only reflected back what each person did to him, like a mirror. Although he spoke cheerfully no matter what story he was telling, Maomao thought she could detect a hint of emotion when he spoke of his brother.

“Whenever I was being bullied, my brother would come along and save me. I didn’t have to do anything—he would get the other guys back. That’s why I had to learn to do the same thing. And that’s why...” Kokuyou pressed his palms together as if in prayer. “I got our mentor back too. I changed out the livestock pus he was going to use on himself for the human stuff.”

Maomao didn’t say anything, but swallowed hard.

“He got terrible smallpox. The disease he’d experimented so carefully with using so many of his disciples; in the end he screwed up. He became confused and burned the results of his research. Then he started to fade...until my brother put him out of his misery so he wouldn’t suffer anymore.”

Kokuyou no longer sounded quite so blasé.

“After that, my brother died. Suicide. Probably because I told him I switched the poxes.”

Kokuyou squeezed his hands together tightly and his head drooped. He looked like he felt genuinely guilty.

“I should have lied to him. Told him that every experiment fails once in a while. Let him believe the lie.”

“Can mirrors lie?”

Kokuyou shook his head slowly. “After that, I didn’t know what to do. My brother had always been my conduit to the outside world.”

Hence why Kokuyou had ceased to be able to do anything but give back goodwill for goodwill and bad for bad. That was how he moved through his life after his brother’s death.

“What will you do, Maomao? With me, I mean.”

Maomao didn’t say anything. The goosebumps still hadn’t gone away. She had some serious questions about this man, Kokuyou, now; she suspected she wouldn’t be able to treat him the way she had before.

Maybe she shouldn’t have tried to learn the truth, then—but she had needed to understand what made him tick.

A man like a penghou...

It was just as the village chief had said. He would never harm someone who was harmless, but would certainly hurt those who were.

No wonder the chief had seen killing him as his only solution.

"One question," Maomao said.

"Ask away," Kokuyou replied mildly.

"Was the village chief really such a worthless piece of human trash?"

"Who's to say? If nothing else, he was doing a fine job of running the village, right up until the smallpox outbreak."

About what Maomao had figured. After all, the kids at Yo's house had chatted happily to the chief about her when he happened by.

"I do get why he thought what I was doing was dangerous and wanted me to stop. But he was the one who picked the fight."

Maomao didn't really know what the village chief had been like. She thought, though, that she now had at least some sense of how he had felt about Kokuyou.

He probably thought that Kokuyou wasn't playing by the rules.

This was a man who could heal illnesses that couldn't be cured by a shaman's spells. Who could treat people so that they didn't get smallpox.

That was why, as much as he reviled Kokuyou, he'd also tried to do what he did, seeking to inoculate children against the disease. Smallpox scabs from all those years ago would have virtually no power to infect anyone—except, by sheer misfortune, they had infected one child, which had led to this entire mess.

He'd been trying to help people, but had found himself hunted down as a vicious criminal. No wonder he had hated Kokuyou so much.

What to do about this? Maomao wondered.

Nothing changed the fact that the chief was a criminal. What Kokuyou did might have been a crime in its own right, but there would be no investigation after all this time. Especially not with Kokuyou poised to be so vital to the medical staff in the future.

I don't want to judge people based purely on whether they're useful or not, but...

Maomao was one who didn't always play by the rules herself.

Chue was presumably listening in on the entire conversation. Maomao would just have to leave the choice in her hands. Then again, as long as

Maomao didn’t say anything, Chue probably wouldn’t either.

Maomao was not driven by a sense of justice. She simply couldn’t stand to see inhuman things done.

The question was, which category did Kokuyou’s actions fall into?

This must be punishment for dancing around it until now.

Maomao didn’t feel she was suited to sit in judgment over other people. Not even Kokuyou.

She was inclined to look the other way about what he had done. If she ignored it, he could go on keeping an eye on Sazen. He could keep playing with Chou-u. And as a doctor, he might be able to find a way to stop the smallpox outbreak that was still raging.

So long as no one acted maliciously toward Kokuyou, he would be a source of help and aid to many people.

“Let’s say I pray you only ever have decent folk around you,” Maomao said.

“Praying? That’s not like you, Maomao!”

Maomao simply waved and left the room.

Chue was out there, her one colicky lock of hair bouncing.

“Anything to report?” she chirped.

“No, nothing,” Maomao replied, shaking her head.

“Too bad,” Chue said, falling into step behind her. “You look so tired, Miss Maomao. Will you be all right going straight to the Moon Prince’s palace?”

“If anything, Master Jinshi is exactly the person I want to see right now.”

“Well, well!” Chue said, with a grin that Maomao found very unpleasant.

Her choice of destination was a testament to how bothered she still was by the conversation.

Epilogue

Jinshi's palace looked like it always did. Maomao entered his chambers. The room had been heated to a sultry temperature and was suffused with the delicious smell of food. Maomao, though, had no appetite.

"Goodness, whatever is the matter?" Suiren asked solicitously.

"I don't feel like eating today," Maomao replied.

"But you need your energy if you're to look after the young master's health. Hold on just a moment." Suiren took an oily-looking food item and set it to the side, and prepared an easily digestible side dish. "Go on, eat something. It doesn't have to be much."

"Yes, ma'am."

I'm so blessed, Maomao thought. Having someone who was so caring toward her.

"You don't have to force yourself. You can take some home," said Jinshi, who was also concerned. "Did something happen? You can tell me."

Like hell I can.

Maomao hoped that if she kept quiet about Kokuyou, no more people would come to grief.

It wasn't that she was caught up in some twisted sense of what was "right." It was simply a matter of what would happen if she told Jinshi what was on her mind. He would "catch" her concerns. She couldn't let herself act as though she could literally come to him about anything. Jinshi and Maomao occupied different places in the world. If Maomao revealed what she knew, Jinshi would move to see justice done against Kokuyou.

If Chue did indeed know everything and was choosing not to say it, it must have been because she understood the same dynamic.

That's not very fair, Miss Chue, Maomao thought, biting her lip.

Of course, Jinshi might have secrets of his own, things he couldn't tell anyone, just like Maomao did. Things that weighed on him far more heavily than anything that weighed on Maomao.

"Are you sure you're all right? Is the visit to Red Plum Village still

bothering you?” Jinshi was worried, but he didn’t need to be.

Maomao made herself give him a small smile. “Master Jinshi. May I?” She rose from her chair and approached him.

“May you what?”

She stood in front of him.

It was only the two of them there in the room. Someone could have been watching from some hidden vantage point, but for the moment Maomao didn’t care.

“I need to recharge a bit, myself.”

She placed her hand over his—then let her head drop onto his shoulder.

“M-Maomao?”

“Too presumptuous?”

“No... It’s fine. Recharge all you need.” He ran a hand along the back of her head.

“If you say so.”

They stayed that way—she wasn’t sure for how long. All she knew was that when she raised her head again, she’d found some of her appetite.

Jinshi must have made many decisions like Maomao had. He must have resolved problems that she had so far avoided.

“What’s wrong?” Jinshi asked, stroking her back. “I mean it.” There was no sensuality in his touch, only the compassionate concern you might show a sick person.

My life might be easier if you would get aggressive.

If he tried something outrageous, then she could get angry at him, and the fury might drive Kokuyou from her mind.

“Master Jinshi,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Would you consider becoming a commoner?”

“What brought this on?” Jinshi looked around hesitantly—this was not a conversation he would want anyone to overhear. Suiren was nowhere to be seen. Finally he said, “If I could snap my fingers and do it, I would.”

“It would be a lot harder to put food on the table, but your responsibilities would disappear.”

“That’s certainly appealing.” He sounded like he meant it.

Maomao stepped away from him and went back to her seat. Then she started in on the food that had been so diligently remade for her sake.

Suiren’s cooking was delicious, as always, and Maomao made sure her stomach was nice and full.

Time for a change of perspective.

Instead of fretting about what was happening, she should think proactively about how to deal with problems when they did occur. That was much more like Maomao. But first, she needed to prioritize nutrition.

She worked away at the meal, intending to eat every last bite.

Somewhere in the middle of it, she said, “Master Jinshi?”

“Yes?”

“You can have your meal too. It’s hard to eat with you staring at me.”

“Oh, er, of course,” Jinshi said, but he never did take his eyes off Maomao.

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

Whence Comes the Epidemic?

As an outbreak of smallpox threatens to spread, the only hope in these desperate circumstances is offered by Yo, who once survived the disease herself. “I’m alive today because of one particular doctor.”

A civilian doctor versed in the treatment of smallpox? Maomao can think of only one person: Kokuyou, the young man she sometimes asks to help around the Verdigris House apothecary shop. He keeps half his face covered—to hide his smallpox scars.

Kokuyou aces his interview with the palace doctors, and he and Yo are sent to the village where the outbreak is occurring, a hamlet of only a few hundred people.

At the same time, Maomao receives a summons from Jinshi. The daughter of a relative of the Empress Dowager is suspected of placing a curse on someone, and he wants her to find out what’s going on. This young lady is the weak and retiring Zhizi, daughter of a concubine—and she’s also the Empress Dowager’s niece. So the request isn’t precisely from Jinshi—it effectively comes from the Empress Dowager herself. As Maomao investigates, she begins to suspect that Zhizi is being poisoned.

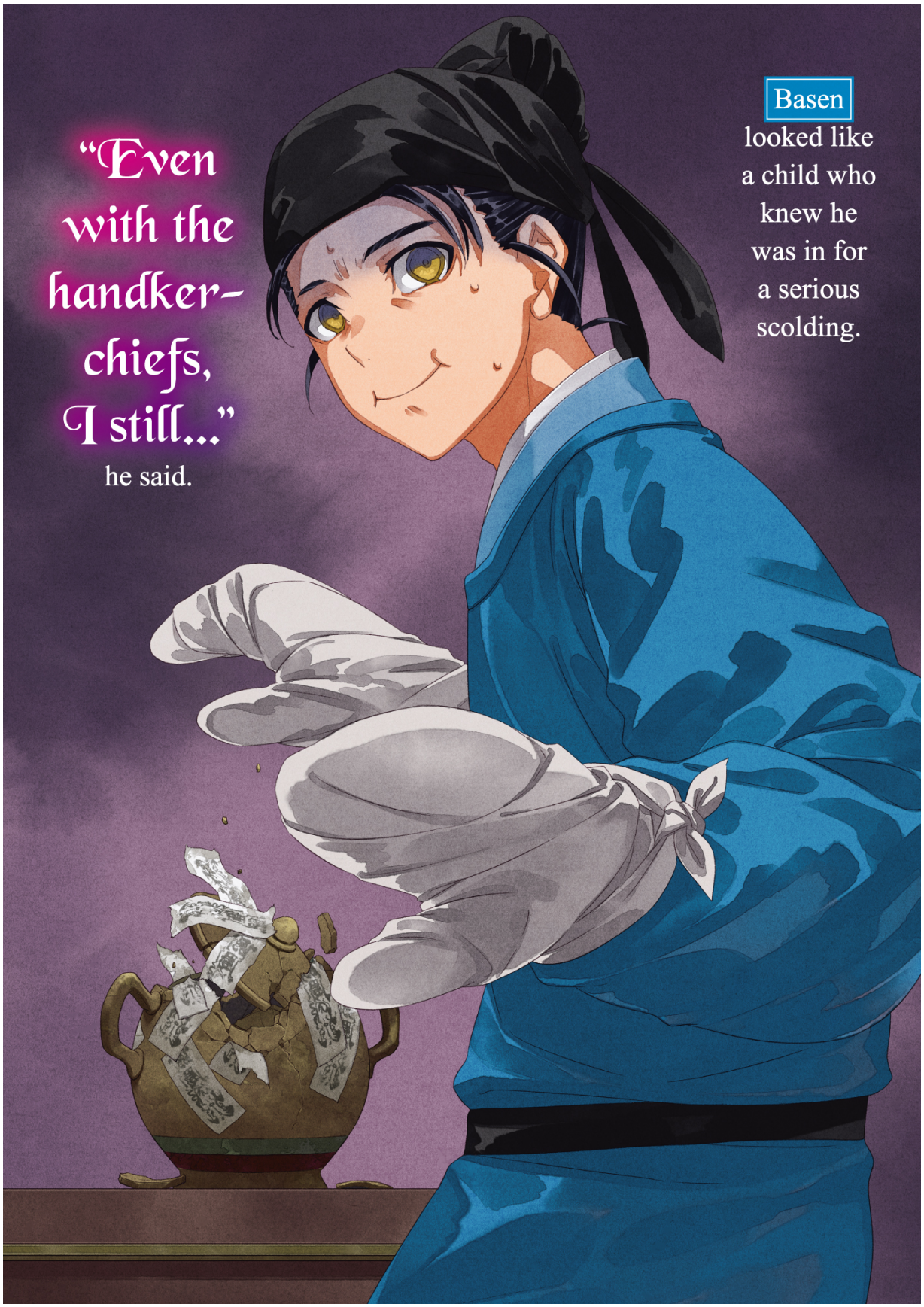
Even as the case proceeds, Maomao is still working with Yo, who is deeply engaged in finding a way to prevent the spread of smallpox. Maomao, though, finds herself asking one crucial question: Where did the smallpox come from?

The answer will lead her to a shocking revelation...

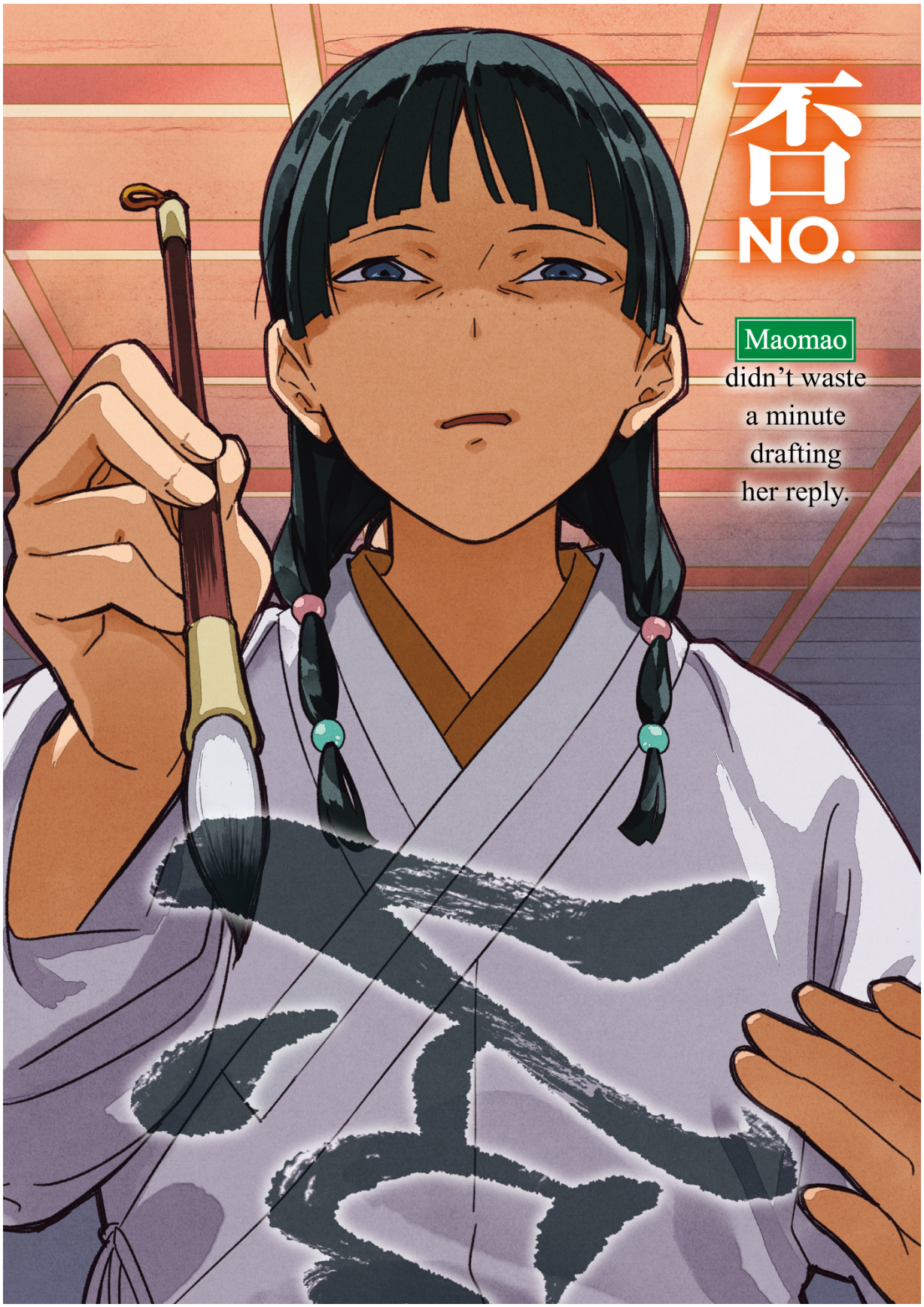
"Let the rest of us in on it?"
Jinshi crossed his arms and looked at Maomao.

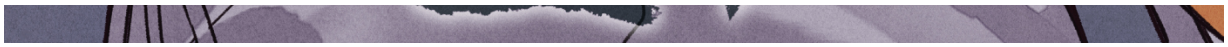
The Apothecary Diaries
Author
Natsu Hyuuga
Illustration
Touko Shino
16
"What do you want to do, Master Jinshi ?"
Maomao folded her arms and groaned.

Chue proceeded to read Basen's and Lishu's lips, even doing the voices.
"It's gotten pretty cold. Are you keeping well?"
"Yes, I'm all right, thank you. I'm used to the work now."


"Even with the handker-chiefs, I still..."
he said.
Basen looked like a child who knew he was in for a serious scolding.

"Lahan's Brother's dryin' 'em!"
Junjie was aware of them.
"Oh, *that*."


否
NO.
Maomao
didn't waste
a minute
drafting
her reply.



Translator’s Notes —*The Apothecary Diaries* vol. 16

Like Cats and Dogs

Hello again, and welcome back to another *Apothecary Diaries* Diaries! Let’s jump right into our discussion with an excerpt from volume 16, shall we? (Words formatted in bold for emphasis)

“The tea she steeped fresh for me had something bitter in it. As well as ***catmint****.”*

*“****Catmint****?”*

“Yes, sir. The ***name may refer to cats****, and they do like it, but it has medicinal effects* ***on humans as well.****”*

“Speaking of cats...”

“That’s right, sir.”

Back in the rear palace, they’d had a nasty little calico number also named Maomao, who’d often gone after the medical office’s supply of ***catnip****.*

In this passage, Maomao describes the ingredients in the concubine’s tea, and one of the items she mentions made the translation team pause (paws?) and consider the best English word. When she says that the tea contained *catmint*, she uses the Japanese word *inu-hakka*, while in the places where we’ve translated *catnip*, the word is *matatabi*.

Matatabi was the more familiar of these to the translation team; it turns up in stories periodically and is usually simply translated as *catnip*. If you do an internet search for *inu-hakka*, though, it too comes up as *catnip*. And oddly enough, the name means *dog mint* in Japanese, the opposite of the English name. When Jinshi questions Maomao about the ingredient, she replies (in a literal rendering of the Japanese), “Yes, sir. Though the name

refers to dogs, the effect is similar to *matatabi*. It can be used as a medicinal herb as well. And further, just like *matatabi*, cats can't get enough of it."

There's one additional wrinkle not visible in any English representation: The Chinese characters used in this passage for the word *inu-hakka* are 荊芥. Pronounced *jingjie* in Chinese, they refer to a real medicinal plant used in Traditional Chinese Medicine, but they are not the standard kanji for *inu-hakka* (which are 犬薄荷).

From a translation perspective, there are a couple of issues to deal with in this line. First is the most obvious, which is that there's a modest joke in the text relating to the fact that the plant name refers to dogs but stimulates cats. Then there's the question of what exactly these herbs really are.

You don't have to dig too far to discover that *matatabi* is actually a plant called silver vine in English; catnip proper is in fact a different species. But then, so is *jingjie*. To make a very long story short, all three are unique plants—when we compiled a table of their characteristics, we discovered that many traits are shared by two of the plants but not the third. For example, *inu-hakka* and *jingjie* are members of the mint family, but not *matatabi*, which is actually related to the kiwifruit. Meanwhile, *inu-hakka* and *matatabi* both contain what are known as "cat attractants" (nepetalactone and nepetalactol, respectively) which induce euphoric states in cats, but *jingjie* does not.

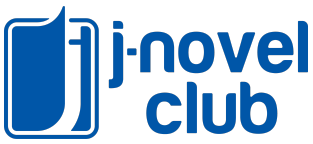
Even after we started to disentangle the identities of the plants, we were left with the question of what to call them in translation. Although *inu-hakka* translates literally as *dog mint*, the plant known as dog mint in English (because there is one, *Clinopodium calamintha*) is completely different from *inu-hakka* (which is *Nepeta cataria*). That meant we couldn't use the name dog mint, threatening to undercut the joke in the passage. Meanwhile, *jingjie* is sometimes called Japanese catnip, but we avoid using the names of real-world locations in the translation of plant names throughout this series. (For more on this, see the Bonus Translator's notes in volume 7, "A Translation Out Of Time.")

Ultimately, we had to solve the fundamental problem of what to call the plants before we could address the use of the names in the text. We settled on referring to *inu-hakka* as catmint, because that was the most accurate. (Both names refer to the genus *Nepeta*.) We then called *matatabi* catnip, which is traditional if not one hundred percent accurate. Finally, we made

no distinction between *inu-hakka* and *jingjie*, but since these are treated as the same plant by the text (*inu-hakka* glosses *jingjie*), that wasn't a problem.

Again, this left us with no plant name referring to dogs, so the joke as written in the original passage wasn't going to work. We settled instead on contrasting cats and people: "The name may refer to cats, and they do like it, but it has medicinal effects on humans as well." Thus we managed in English to preserve the two plants mentioned as separate entities, to refer to the cat-attracting property from the original, to remain basically accurate to English names and usage, and to capture the element of humor as well. Pretty successful, in translation terms. Luckily, these rendering riddles are like catnip to us...

Have fun, read widely, and we'll see you again!



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Kusuriya No Hitorigoto 16
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